

A man with dark hair, wearing a black coat over a tan waistcoat and a white cravat, stands on a grassy dune overlooking the ocean under a cloudy sky. The background is a scenic view of a beach with dunes and the sea.

The Earl's Disputed  
Inheritance

An  
*Erroneous*  
Assumption  
FENELLA J MILLER

**The Earl's Disputed  
Inheritance**

**Book Two**

**An Erroneous Assumption**

**By**

**Fenella J Miller**

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**Cover Design J D Smith**

**Remembering all those who died in the Covid pandemic here  
and around the world.**

## Chapter One

Somiton Hall, November, 1815

Richard Somiton read his letter for a second time, swore volubly under his breath, and went in search of his twin, the Earl of Somiton.

‘Adam, I’ve just received a letter from the widow of one of our sea captains, Mrs Sarah Trenwith, she is asking for our help as his death at sea has left her in financial difficulties and unable to support her family.’

His brother, who was also engrossed in a letter he’d received by the same delivery, looked up. ‘Why would she write to you? Do you have some connection with this woman?’

‘No, I’ve never met her. I did like Captain Trenwith, he was a fine man, a true Cornish sailor and one of the best we had. It was a damned shame that his ship went down and he and his crew were lost.’

‘I thought all the families were recompensed for their loss – surely the same was done for this Mrs Trenwith?’ Adam frowned – he wasn’t happy with this news.

‘It was, of course, but for some reason the money didn’t reach Mrs Trenwith. Several of his crew were from the same village, Pencarrow, and it appears that none of their families received any money either. I’ll have to go down myself. I owe it to the man. The person responsible for dispersing this money must be corrupt and have

pocketed it for himself.'

'Edward and Eleanor are now back from their wedding trip and happily settled in their new home. There's no reason why you can't go. I'll return to London and deal with pressing matters there.'

'Mrs Somiton has proved an admirable hostess for us and her son Leo has now resigned his commission so he can act as guardian to the four girls,' Richard replied.

'Eloise and Amelia have settled in well without the pernicious influence of their mother. I wonder if we'll ever find the man who tried to set fire to us all a few months ago. Oliver Somiton, his son and this woman have vanished without trace. Jessica is nothing like her murdering father and brother, thank the Lord.'

'Leo's sister, Frances has become bosom bows with Jessica and the four girls are like siblings rather than distant cousins. Are you quite sure, Adam, that Leo will be able to keep them in line? They are a lively group of young ladies and always looking for mischief.'

'Miss Devonshire, the companion I appointed, has proved a godsend. The girls are learning to conduct themselves as they should and now that Eleanor is home, she'll no doubt be involved as well. Eloise and Amelia were a tad wild when they arrived but are hardly recognisable as those girls nowadays.' His brother waved his own letter. 'This missive is from the Runners that have been looking for the Somitons. It seems they have news. As I have business in Town, I'll combine the two. It's fortunate that the weather's clement and that winter hasn't truly set in.'

'We can travel to London together. I'll take the mail coach to Cornwall and hire myself a hack when I get there. I'll not take my valet...'

'Manson must go with you, brother. Things are different since I became the earl. You might not have a title of your own but you're an aristocrat now and cannot gallivant about the place as you used to.'

'If you insist then my valet will come too. You don't object to me travelling on the common stage?'

Adam smiled. 'Absolutely not – it's too far and too expensive to go by post-chaise. It occurs to me that you could sail there – there might

well be a packet going down the coast that you could take a berth on.’

‘If there’s a passage available then that’s what I’ll do. This excursion might well take several weeks which means I might not be back for the festive season.’

‘That would be a shame – it will be our first Christmas at Somiton Hall and I’d like all the family to be here.’

‘That gives me just over six weeks to complete my business. I’ll do my best, Adam, to be back in time but it rather depends on what kind of chicanery I discover there.’

‘We can inform everyone at dinner tonight. I’ll not be gone more than a sennight. Leo is going to make an excellent addition to our team. With business expanding at the rate it is, and my added responsibilities as the earl, there’s too much work for Edward. The sooner that Leo is able to take over some of these responsibilities the better.’

Lady Eleanor, the previous earl’s daughter, had married Edward in the summer and was now Mrs Revere. Grace, her younger sister and their mother, the countess, lived in the Dower House. Leo and Frances’s mother had become firm friends with the countess in the same way that the girls were now inseparable.

Richard had grown up with just his brother for company, had little experience with young ladies apart from those he flirted with, and loved having a parcel of cousins milling about the place. Fortunately, neither he nor his brother had a romantic interest in any of these young ladies but he was quite certain that when Adam opened the grand house in Grosvenor Square for next Season it would take the combined efforts of both himself, Adam and Leo to keep the eager gentlemen at bay.

Lady Charlotte, the dowager countess, and Mrs Somiton were already busy making the necessary arrangements. The Season didn’t commence until April but it appeared musicians, invitations and such things had to be in place by December. Adam had decided that having all five girls come out at the same time would be easier than being obliged to be in Town three years in a row.

Richard wasn't so sure this was a sensible idea. There would be three balls. Grace, who would have had her own ball this summer if it hadn't been for the fire, would go first and then the sisters Eloise and Millie, would be second and Frances and Jessica would be third.

The girls were equally excited at the prospect and Grace was no longer disappointed that she hadn't had her come out last summer. Having one in London at the start of the Season was every young lady's dream.

It had taken a few weeks to restore the fire damage done to Somiton Hall but since then Adam had entertained frequently. There had been dinners, informal musical evenings and two dances so the girls were well prepared for what they would face in London in the spring.

The ostensible reason that a young lady participated in a Season was to find a suitable husband. From the various conversations he'd had with his cousins none of them were in a hurry to leave Somiton. Therefore, for them this expedition was to have the opportunity to wear their new gowns and be seen in the most prestigious houses in Town.

Grace and Frances were nineteen years of age, Eloise was eighteen, her sister and Jessica were only seventeen. He thought Adam was playing with fire exposing so many volatile young ladies to the temptations and attentions of gentlemen in search of a wealthy, well-bred wife. All of them, especially Grace, were going to be in demand.

Journeying to Cornwall on business for the next few weeks would take his mind off the unpalatable prospect of escorting his cousins to balls, routs, soirées and parties – not to mention expeditions to Vauxhall, the menagerie and other attractions.

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Miss Demelza Trenwith stared gloomily at the meagre pile of coins in front of her on the scrubbed, wooden table. Mama had taken to her bed again saying she wasn't well enough to deal with things and had yet again left her eldest daughter in charge of the household. Mama was fading away and Demelza feared for her life.

‘Demelza, Johnny and I are going down to the village. Do you want anything?’

‘Silas, please don’t go anywhere near The Jolly Sailor. There are a lot of things I want but we’ve no money to buy them.’

Her brother, at sixteen, three years her junior was spending far too much time fraternising with the local fishermen who were also the local smugglers. He was being led astray by Johnny, his senior by a year, and she feared they would both be picked up by the revenue men if they continued on this path.

‘We could get some fish if any of the boats have come in.’

‘I doubt you’ll get much with the few pennies we’ve got left this month. I thank God every day that we grow our own food and have a cow, pigs and chickens, for without these we would surely have starved.’

‘Pa said if anything happened to him we would be taken care of – why have we been left destitute? If Johnny and I become smugglers it will be Somiton’s fault.’

‘Hush, you mustn’t speak like that. Anyway, it’s Lord Somiton now as you very well know.’

‘What did the bank say when you went to see them in Bodmin yesterday?’

‘Nobody would agree to speak to me. I’m a girl, no one of importance, and they can do as they wish as we’ve no man to stand up for us.’

‘Did you write to his lordship?’

‘No, I wrote to Mr Richard Somiton as our father used to speak most highly of him. I signed the letter as if I was Mama as I feared he too would ignore any letter from me.’

Her older brother stuck his head through the door. ‘Silas, what’s keeping you? It’s too cold to leave the horses standing.’

Demelza was on her feet and beside her brother before he could escape. ‘You two would be better busy about the farm helping rather than riding off to get into mischief.’

He scowled and pulled away from her hand. ‘We’re not servants, sister, we’re gentlemen. It’s bad enough that you dragged us back from



school but don't expect us to work whilst we're here.'

'Pa would be ashamed of you. Our mother is still prostrate with grief, unable to cope, and what are you doing to help? All you do is add to her worries.'

'He wanted us to live a life of leisure, marry well, not work for a living like he did.'

Sometimes, much as she loved her brother, she wished to punch him on the nose. 'He wanted no such thing and well you know it. He intended that you get a good education, become a lawyer or a doctor and not follow him to sea. He certainly didn't want you to laze about the place pretending you're something that you're not.'

Johnny straightened. He was a head taller than her and for a second she felt a flicker of fear at his expression. 'Are you suggesting that we're not gentlemen?'

'I'm telling you that you behave as if we're still wealthy. We might live in a large house, have two inside servants and two outside men, but our main income was from our father's profession. He was a well-respected and well-remunerated sea captain but when he died it appears that he left no money at all according to the bank.'

'We cannot continue our education so what do you suggest we do?'

'I know what you shouldn't do and that's fraternise with the smugglers. It will only end in disaster.'

'It's a lark, nothing more, and without the silver we've garnered these past few months we would already have had to sell the house.'

She stared in horror at her brother. He told her that they'd sold some of their father's possessions now she knew the truth. Johnny realised he'd revealed too much. Instead of staying to explain, to apologise, he all but snarled at Silas to come with him and strode from the room.

Her brothers were out of control – they were both almost young men – there was nothing she could do to restrain their dangerous behaviour. The current revenue officers were less than vigilant along this coastline but it was only a matter of time before her brothers were arrested. They could be imprisoned, transported, or if violence was

involved, then they could be hanged.

She ran after them and was able to catch up with Johnny as he'd stopped to fondle their large lurcher, Billy.

'Tell me, what did you do in order to get the money?'

'We didn't do anything, Demelza, we just gave Captain Borden permission to store his ill-gotten gains in the caves on our beach.'

'Thank the good Lord for that. I beg you, both of you, not to become anymore involved than you already are. I heard it on good authority from Lady Pendragon last week that a fresh troop of officers will be arriving imminently. The lackadaisical approach of the current ones has not gone unnoticed.'

He grinned and looked more like the brother she loved than a fierce stranger. 'We're going to The Jolly Sailor. We'll talk to fishermen, who no doubt are also smugglers, but nothing else, I give you my word.'

'Pa would knock your heads together but I can do nothing but appeal to your better nature. Young gentlemen of your age shouldn't be going into such dens of iniquity. If anything happened to either of you it would kill our mother and that's not an exaggeration.'

'This place is my heritage and I intend to do whatever it takes to keep it intact. However, I give you my word that we'll do nothing untoward until you've heard from Somiton.'

'The letter went three weeks ago so there should be someone on their way here as I speak. This gentleman can explain why the money that we should have had last year has failed to appear. There are several families who lost husbands when the ship went down and they are in a worse position than us.'

She intended that whoever came on Lord Somiton's behalf should also make further enquiries on the behalf of those poor souls.

Since many of the tin mines were now closed, as their seams had run out, unemployment was rife in the neighbourhood. What else could these people do but join the smugglers in an attempt to stay out of the poorhouse?

The Trenwits were a respected family in Cornwall, they could trace their lineage back for hundreds of years. Pa had been a younger

son so had been obliged to make his own way in the world but he'd had every advantage and this house had been gifted to him by his grandpa on his marriage.

Being a ship's captain for The Somiton Line had been a prestigious position, one that any young gentleman could aspire to. The fact that it meant her father was away more than he was home was part of the job. Mama, she was quite sure, was more distraught by the lack of funds since Pa had died last year than she was by his permanent absence.

The carriage and the team that pulled it had been sold and this money had kept them out of debt for several months. The two splendid horses that her brothers rode would have to go next and they were both well aware of that fact which is why they were so angry all the time.

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Richard, accompanied by Manson, disembarked from the mail coach at Bodmin heartily sick of being cooped up for so long. They had no commercial interests in this county so this was his first visit. The town seemed prosperous enough on the surface, plenty of well-dressed people going about their business.

However, this was the main thoroughfare where the bank and businesses were situated, he was quite certain that poverty would be rife in other, less salubrious parts.

'Manson, take our bags and find us accommodation somewhere without crawlers in the bedding. Tell the proprietor that we require two chambers for a week. Then secure our places on a coach leaving a week from today.'

'Yes, sir. Do you have any preference?' He pointed to the three establishments.

'I'll leave that up to you. I'm going in search of mounts for us. It's too late to ride the ten miles to the Trenwith house today.'

His valet was a resourceful sort of fellow, he not only took care of his personal needs, he also acted as his man of affairs and secretary when needed. Manson could both read and write – not fluently – but enough to be useful.

It was a pleasure to stretch his legs, feel the sea breeze blowing on his face after the stuffy interior of a mail coach for the past few days. He'd come armed with the necessary paperwork to establish his credentials but had no appointment at the bank in which the money owed to the Widow Trenwith and the three other families had been deposited a year ago. He wished to arrive unannounced and not give whoever was responsible for this malfeasance time to cover his tracks.

After getting his bearings he soon found the livery stable that had been recommended to him by three people he'd spoken to on his walk. He strode in and was immediately greeted by a jolly fellow.

'How can I help you, my lord? I've the best nags around to hire or to buy.'

'I'm not a lord, that's my brother. I take it that you're the proprietor of this establishment – one Jethro Tully?'

'I am that, sir. You're a fine, big gentleman and no mistake. I reckon I've got just the nag for you.'

'I need two horses; my companion's shorter than me but as heavy. Show me what's available.'

There were only four animals up to his and Manson's weight. He examined each with an expert eye. 'I'll take this black gelding and the chestnut. I'll need them for a week and will return them here for livery most nights.'

'Right you are, sir. The black answers to the name of Ben and the chestnut's called Red. When will you be needing them first?'

'Tomorrow morning. Tell me, Jethro, do you expect bad weather over the next few days? It seems colder here than it was further north and the wind has a bitter feel to it.'

'Storms are coming, that's for sure, but not for a day or two. I reckon there could be snow – we don't see much of that around here most winters.'

The cost of hire was reasonable. They shook hands on the deal and Richard went out into the street again. A blast of icy wind made him glad he was wearing his caped riding coat. He turned to look at the sea. The waves were white-capped, huge and menacing as they crashed against the black rocks at the base of the cliffs on the far side

of the bay. Not a time to be at sea.

## Chapter Two

Demelza was on edge for the remainder of the day, jumping at noises, starting at shadows and didn't feel comfortable until her brothers returned. They'd quite obviously had more than one mug of cider but at least they were home.

'What's for supper? It's blowing a gale out there and it's made us both sharp-set,' Johnny said as he handed his caped riding coat to Maisie, the maid of all work, who was waiting a little too eagerly by the door to receive it.

Silas hung his own coat up and made his way to the fire, holding out his hands to the blaze. 'There'll be no free-traders out tonight and no revenue men either. I don't envy any ships attempting to sail past the point in this gale.'

Her brothers exchanged glances and she knew what they were thinking. If a ship foundered then they would be out to see what they could find along the beach. Everybody would do their best to rescue any sailors but would be more interested in the flotsam and jetsam that came in with the tide.

There'd been no ships lost so far this year and she prayed there wouldn't be one tonight. Taking the cargo from a ship that had sunk was a criminal offence but that didn't stop the villagers from doing so. There were no wreckers in Pencarrow as there were in other places along the coast. These evil men lured unsuspecting ships onto the rocks by using their lanterns to mimic a lighthouse.

The letter from The Somiton Line had said that pa's ship had gone down on the other side of the world in a typhoon. She believed this

was a particularly fierce storm that caused havoc to shipping in those foreign oceans.

Dolly, the cook-housekeeper, had made a tasty vegetable pie followed by baked apples and cream. Demelza took a tray to her mother.

‘Mama, the boys are home. You can stop worrying about them now.’

‘How can I do so? If only your father hadn’t perished last year they would be safely at university and not here fraternising with ne’er-do-wells in the village.’

‘I’ve written to Lord Somiton and am hopeful someone will come any day now to explain what’s happened to the recompense we were promised. Once that’s available then things will return to normal and hopefully the boys can continue their education.’

She placed the tray across her mother’s knees and for the first time in many days it was viewed with some enthusiasm by her parent.

‘I find that I’m hungry tonight. I might get up tomorrow – I’ve no wish to be unavailable if this person comes.’

Now was not the time to point out that this visitor might not arrive for several days, or at all. Also, the fact that the weather was too wet for anyone to travel on horseback at the moment meant nobody was likely to come, even if they were in the neighbourhood, until it was more clement.

‘I’ll come in to help you dress after I’ve done my chores outside, Mama. I’ll be up to collect your tray after I’ve eaten with the boys.’

The next morning dawned crisp and bright – the fierce storm had blown itself out overnight. The ground would be wet after so much rain but it shouldn’t prevent a rider from coming from Bodmin if they so wished.

As always, she dressed in her work clothes, a thick gown with long sleeves and high neck that had once been a pretty pink but was now faded to a nondescript colour. She tied a thick woollen shawl around her shoulders and pushed her feet into wooden clogs. These were the most sensible footwear for feeding the chickens, collecting the eggs

and milking the house cow.

The outside men should be doing these tasks but Josie, the cow, couldn't abide either of them and only gave milk if she was sitting on the stool. Demelza enjoyed her interaction with the chickens so was happy to keep that task for herself.

Ed and Joe had more than enough to do taking care of the pigs, cleaning out the livestock, repairing the fences, keeping them supplied with firewood and setting traps for rabbits for the pot. In the spring they ploughed fields, planted, weeded and harvested.

Before Pa had drowned there'd been four men doing the job that these two now had to accomplish alone. The same had happened inside – she'd had to let go the personal maid that she and her mother had shared as well as the second girl who'd worked in the kitchens and done the heavy work.

Billy, the lurcher, who was waiting hopefully for any dropped eggs, suddenly stiffened. His ears pricked, his long plummy tail wagged and he took off, hurdling the gate and barking furiously.

She ran to the back door, hastily placed the eggs on the step and then went off in search of the dog. Billy still believed that his master would come home as he always had and whenever he thought there might be a rider approaching, he raced off to greet them.

There was mud on her skirts, her clogs were filthy and she was quite sure she'd smeared a goodly quantity on her face a moment ago. This didn't deter her. Their house stood facing the sea, coarse grass led to the cliff edge, so there was no formal boundary. Visitors were obliged to leave their mounts in the farmyard and then walk around to the front door in order to enter.

Sometimes villagers used the path that belonged to the family but her father had never objected. Billy had once almost knocked one of them over the cliff in his boisterous enthusiasm so she had no option but to call him back if he was heading in that direction.

The approach to Seaview was more a narrow lane than a driveway and it meandered through the gorse bushes and grass and connected the house to the track that led to the village and to the main thoroughfare that would take one eventually to Bodmin.



She could hear her dog barking and it wasn't coming from the cliffs but from the rear of the house. Could this be the gentleman she was expecting? Were their financial difficulties going to be over at last?

The dog was quiet which was a good sign and she could definitely hear horses approaching. Quite forgetting she was dressed in garments more suitable to a servant than a member of the family she ran to meet the two riders who were approaching at a trot.

To her astonishment the gentlemen ignored her and rode right past as if she was invisible. They were both so muffled against the elements that she'd been unable to make out their features. One was taller than the other, but apart from that they were indistinguishable.

Billy had remained with her and nudged her with his long nose. 'That's not a good start, is it? I dislike them both already for their ill manners.'

Mama was still in bed, as were her brothers, there was no one there to greet these visitors apart from herself. Maisie would show them to the drawing room – that's where all visitors were taken – but there would be no fire lit and the room would be cold and unwelcoming.

Nobody called to see them apart from the vicar occasionally so it could be none other than someone sent from Somiton in answer to her letter. Joe was at that very moment dealing with two handsome horses.

'Them gentlemen has gone around the front, miss.'

'Thank you, they passed me on the lane.'

She collected the half a dozen eggs that she'd left in the bowl outside the back door and went in, kicking off her clogs in the boot room before stepping into the kitchen.

'Maisie's doing the fire, miss, I'll make them a nice pot of tea, shall I?'

'Yes, do that.'

She dare not risk going into the entrance hall in case she was seen so took the narrow back stairs. She paused and looked into her mother's bedchamber but her parent was still sleeping. She must speak

to these objectionable gentlemen herself.

Her normal clothes, as always, were where she'd left them ready for her to put on after she'd completed her ablutions. A full twenty minutes had passed before she was ready to descend. Her hair was neat, her face clean, and she was wearing an elegant dark green gown and matching spencer. She was quite sure they wouldn't mistake her for a servant now.

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The tea that had been brought to them was much appreciated by Richard and his valet. It had been damned cold riding from Bodmin that morning.

'We could be waiting for an hour or more. In my experience it takes a lady an unconscionable time to get ready.'

'Maybe it would have been better, sir, to have sent word of our coming and not turn up unannounced like this.'

'There are four members of this family. Two young men and a daughter – I can't credit that none of them are prepared to come and speak to me.'

There was a slight sound behind him and he turned. A young lady with startling red hair and periwinkle blue eyes stood in the doorway viewing him with what he could only think was dislike. She looked vaguely familiar.

'I am Miss Trenwith. It was I who wrote to you. I assume that one of you is Mr Somiton.'

There was no apology for keeping him waiting, no thanks for having come so far to see her. Then he realised why she was so snippy with them.

He bowed as if to royalty. 'Miss Trenwith, I rode past you not realising who you were. I made an erroneous assumption and thought you a servant girl. Please accept my most humble apology for my error.' He then pointed to his companion. 'This is Manson, my valet and sometime man of business.'

She smiled at Manson but then turned to the attack. 'Indeed you did, sir. I was incensed at your behaviour but accept your gracious words and tender my own apology. You've been kept waiting, and in a

room with no heat.'

'It was a little chilly initially, Miss Trenwith, but things are better now the fire is burning well.'

She smiled and he hoped that the unfortunate incident was behind them. Heaven knows what would have happened if he'd caused her to jump aside, had splashed her with mud as some arrogant gentleman might have done.

'Since my father died last year things have been difficult. We no longer have the staff we used to employ hence my needing to work on the farm when necessary.'

'Do you not have two healthy brothers? I would think it better for them to be doing the heavy work outside.'

Her smile vanished. 'My brothers are still of the opinion that they can spend their days doing as they please, that we still have the wherewithal to support their idleness.'

'Is Mrs Trenwith to join us?'

'No, I'm sorry, but she's indisposed. As I was the one who contacted you it is to me you must refer.'

He and Manson remained standing waiting for her to be seated. He thought maybe she was unaware of the fact that gentlemen couldn't sit before the ladies.

'It's decidedly cold in here, despite your saying the opposite, Mr Somiton. We would do better in the family parlour where it's warm.' She didn't wait for his response but turned and marched out leaving him no alternative but to follow.

The room she took them to was indeed more pleasant. It had a central, polished mahogany table, a bureau and six elegant chairs as well as a *chaise longue* and two comfortable, padded armchairs grouped in front of the roaring fire.

'Please be seated, gentlemen, and we can begin our discussion.' She gestured towards the chairs and she took her position on the daybed. Without preamble she launched into her complaint. He listened closely.

'Right, Miss Trenwith, I can see why you're incensed about this. I know for a fact that your father had substantial savings. Like all our

captains he was allowed to use a portion of the hold to bring his own goods back.'

'I'd no idea he did that. Then why are we all but destitute?' She jumped to her feet and went to a pile of documents neatly arranged on the bureau and returned with a letter.

He quickly scanned the contents. 'This is outrageous. Even if there'd been nothing from your father's investments remaining because he'd gambled it away...'

The girl immediately took exception to this comment. 'How dare you suggest that my father gambled. He did no such thing.'

'Miss Trenwith, if you'd waited for me to finish my sentence before interrupting then you'd be aware I wasn't implying that Captain Trenwith did any such thing.'

He watched her through narrowed eyes and she took the hint and remained quiet this time.

'I shall continue. Even if your father was an inveterate gambler and had spent everything else the substantial sum that was deposited by my company should still be there.'

If he'd expected her to look suitably chastened by her error, he would have been disappointed. She nodded and continued as if nothing untoward had taken place between them. 'In which case, sir, where is the money? Are you quite certain no one at your end could have purloined it?'

'I am. The money quite definitely arrived at the bank owned by one Thomas Penrith and his son, David. I can only apologise that your family has been obliged to suffer such deprivations as well as the loss of your beloved father.' He looked at Manson who delved into his jacket, produced two cloth bags that chinked satisfactorily, and handed them to him.

'I came prepared for such an eventuality, Miss Trenwith. I take it you don't wish to deposit this at the Penrith bank?'

'I certainly do not.' She was waiting for him to hand her the coins and he decided to toss one across to her knowing she wouldn't expect the bag to contain gold, which weighed heavy.

Keeping a straight face he leaned over and dropped one of the

purses into her outstretched hand. She, naturally, dropped it. He tried to hide his amusement but failed.

Her eyes snapped with dislike. 'If you expect me to grovel at your feet in order to pick that up, then you'll be disappointed.' She stared pointedly at the bag which had come open and some of the gold had spilled onto the carpet.

Manson, fortunately, dropped to his knees and collected the money, returned it to the bag and politely handed it to her. She smiled sweetly at his valet.

'Thank you, Mr Manson, that was most gallant of you.' She rose gracefully to her feet and before he could prevent it whisked the second bag from his hand.

'Exactly how much is there in here, Mr Somiton? I take it this is an interim payment as from the papers I've perused I know that the family is owed five hundred pounds.'

Things would have been well if her impertinence hadn't annoyed him. He was more easy-going than his brother, but had no intention of being spoken to so disrespectfully by this slip of a girl he'd come hundreds of miles to help.

He stood up slowly. He was a head taller than her and used this to his advantage. He moved closer so he was towering over her before he spoke.

'Miss Trenwith, my company fulfilled its obligation to your family a year ago. The fact that the bank you use has somehow mislaid it does not make us culpable. As far as I'm concerned this is no interim payment but the end of the matter.'

She turned her back on him and walked to the door, head held high. 'Then, you may take your leave. I'm at a loss to understand why you thought it necessary to bring this token gesture in person. I bid you good morning, sir.' All this was spoken without facing him and this added to his anger.

Before he could follow her a terrified maid appeared in the doorway almost invisible beneath two greatcoats. He took his and shrugged into it. His muffler and gloves had been stowed in one sleeve and, when he rammed his arm down, they shot out of the end. The

end of the scarf fell into the flames.

His anger forgotten, he snatched it back and stamped on the singed wool. A wave of shame engulfed him. His behaviour towards the poor child was nothing short of disgraceful. He could feel the disapproval of his valet and had no need to look at his face to know what he thought about the matter.

He'd come here to put matters right and had just made things worse for the family.

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Demelza knew it had been unpardonably rude to speak to Mr Somiton with her back turned but she had no wish for him to see the tears streaking her cheeks. She had made a sad mull of this interview and had now antagonised the one person who could help them. She put the gold on the stairs and removed her handkerchief from the pocket in her skirt. She was mopping her face when her brother thundered down the stairs.

Johnny immediately saw how distressed she was. He was at her side in a moment and put his arms around her. She leaned against him enjoying the comfort of his arms but then stepped away. Her grievance was so strong she spoke without thinking of the consequences.

‘What’s happened? Why are you crying?’

‘Mr Somiton is here, he threw these at me and then said there would be no more despite the fact we should have had four times this amount.’

‘No one upsets my sister. I’m the man of the house – it matters not my actual age – I’m going to draw his cork.’

Before she could stop him, he strode off in search of the man who’d made her cry. She loved him for his protectiveness but knew it could only end in disaster.

## Chapter Three

Richard decided it would be more sensible to depart hastily now and return after he'd remedied the situation at the bank. He and Manson had just reached the front door when a tall, slender young man with the same startlingly blue eyes hurtled towards him. He could be none other than one of her brothers the similarity was so pronounced.

He straightened and put his arm out in the hope it would prevent Trenwith from punching him. 'You really don't want to do that.' It took all his strength to resist the pressure against his arm.

'You made my sister cry. Nobody does that and escapes unscathed.'

So shocked was he by this statement that Richard dropped his arm. His attacker taken unawares lost his balance and only the quick reaction of Manson saved him from pitching forwards.

'Please, Mr Trenwith, shall we continue this outside?' He had the door open and exited knowing that Manson, who still had hold of the young man, would hustle him out before he could protest.

Once the front door was firmly closed behind them there was no danger that whatever took place would be observed or overheard by anyone inside.

'If what I said so distressed your sister that she was in tears then feel free to take a swing at me. I'll not retaliate. I'll say now, I reacted badly to something Miss Trenwith said but there's no excuse for that.'

'You told her that there'd be no more money – that your company had fulfilled its debts and was washing their hands of us.'

‘I did say something similar to that and deeply regret it. Of course, sir, your family will be fully recompensed and my intention is to discover why the substantial sum I know your father had in his account has also vanished.’

Trenwith’s belligerent expression faded. ‘I’m Johnny – the oldest of Demelza’s brothers. She never cries and for her to do so because of something you said made me so incensed I wasn’t thinking straight. I apologise for my threatening to floor you.’ He grinned and held out his hand. Richard shook it vigorously.

‘It’s a long time since anybody managed to do that apart from my brother. I admire your pluck, youngster, as I’m considerably bigger and tougher than you.’

‘Pa used to bank with a smaller concern but it was bought out by Penrith and he had no option but to leave his business there. The Penrith family have nothing to recommend them but their money – they’ve no pedigree or standing in Cornwall.’

‘I recall Captain Trenwith telling me that he was the youngest son and that your uncle is Sir Hugo Trenwith and the ancestral home is the other side of Bodmin – closer to Plymouth.’

‘That’s correct, sir.’

Richard chose his next words carefully. ‘I’m puzzled as to why Mrs Trenwith didn’t apply to her brother-in-law for assistance during this difficult time.’

‘Pa hasn’t – hadn’t – seen Sir Hugo for decades. I’ve no idea what the rift was about but I doubt I’d recognise my uncle if I walked past him in the street.’

‘I intend to see Penrith this afternoon. I’ll come tomorrow morning to tell you what I’ve discovered. I hope to meet Mrs Trenwith next time I visit.’

‘I can’t guarantee that Mama will be down. She has found our straitened circumstances difficult and when we had to sell the carriage and horses it broke her heart.’

‘To whom did they go?’

‘The doctor, he married a wealthy heiress, purchased them for her. If you’re thinking that we might be able to buy them back then I can



guarantee Mrs Henwood won't part with them. Our carriage and the greys that pulled it were the envy of the neighbourhood.'

Trenwith nodded politely and he returned the gesture. The horses were waiting as was a large grey lurcher. He stooped to fondle it. 'You're a fine fellow. The captain mentioned you and said how fond he was of his dog.'

He had much to think about on the long ride back to Bodmin. His brother Adam wouldn't be impressed at the way this business had been handled so far. Richard was considered the less formidable twin, the one more likely to laugh than take offence, and yet he'd done exactly the opposite today.

He dismounted outside the hotel and left Manson to lead his horse to the livery yard. He had no intention of visiting the bank in his dirt but neither did he expect his valet to take care of matters. He was quite capable of polishing his own boots, brushing down his breeches and replacing his stock with a clean one.

With documentary evidence proving that the money had been deposited with the Penrith bank secreted in an inside pocket of his topcoat he was ready to depart. As the bank was no more than a few minutes' walk away from his hotel there was no need for him to put on his topcoat. He abhorred wearing a hat, carrying a cane, or any of that nonsense.

Despite the fact that his valet had arrived after him he was waiting, equally spruced up, in the spacious entrance hall.

'Those papers spoil the cut of your coat, sir, allow me to carry them for you.'

With a smile Richard handed them over – Manson was right – he needed to look every inch a wealthy gentleman and an aristocratic one he supposed. If he and his brother had been in the direct line of descent then he too would be a lord but, as it was, only his brother had been elevated.

He would make sure he mentioned the Earl of Somiton as often as possible. Although he was damned sure they already knew this fact it would do no harm to remind them who they were dealing with.

'Was that a flurry of snow, Manson?'

‘It was, sir, the weather doesn’t look too clever. We’ll not get out of here if the snow lies thick on the roads. I was talking to Jethro a moment ago and said after a heavy fall travelling will be impossible and the roads around here will be closed even to the mail coach.’

‘Then we’d best get this matter settled. The nags we’ve hired can’t be used a second time today. See if you can hire a vehicle of some sort – I gave my word that I would return with news. I didn’t intend to do so today but with the weather worsening we’ve no choice.’

When Manson didn’t immediately set off to follow his orders he knew his valet had something pertinent to say. ‘Spit it out, man, if you’ve something relevant to impart on this matter then I need to know.’

‘If it does snow it won’t stay for more than a week according to the ostler. The roads will be mucky but not impossible once it’s gone. If we attempt to return tomorrow then we might well be marooned somewhere far less salubrious than our present accommodation.’

‘A good point and well made. However, I still want to take whatever news I have to Seaview this afternoon.’

Manson stomped off to do his bidding and this gave him pause. If the promised blizzard arrived whilst they were at the Trenwith house then they would be marooned there instead of here. Was that what he intended? Did he wish to get to know the fiery young lady better?

\*

Demelza left her brother to it, somehow knowing that however autocratic and unpleasant Mr Somiton was he wouldn’t respond to any provocation on Johnny’s part. She retrieved the abandoned bags of gold and took them to the parlour where she tipped them in a shining, golden stream onto the daybed.

The two hundred guineas were enough to keep them solvent for months, to pay the back wages, replenish the larder and perhaps purchase some material to make Mama a new gown to improve her spirits.

‘How much is there?’ Johnny asked as he wandered in.

She told him and also on an impulse handed him two coins. ‘One for you and one for Silas. I don’t want you getting into debt in the

village. Promise me you won't use this to get horribly drunk.'

'Both our horses need shoeing – that's the most urgent expense we have.' He flopped onto one of the armchairs and stretched out his booted feet towards the fire. 'Mr Somiton retracted his statement and sends his apologies for upsetting you. We will be fully recompensed and he also intends to find out what happened to the money Pa had invested in that place.' He gestured towards the bags. 'What do you intend to do with that as you can't very well deposit it in the very place that has already stolen hundreds of pounds from this family?'

'Surely you don't suspect that Mr Penrith or his son are culpable in this matter? It has to be a clerk, someone who has access to the books, who is responsible. They might be thoroughly unpleasant, *nouveau riche*, but I can see no reason why they'd wish to risk their lives and reputations for such a small amount.'

'Six hundred pounds is a small fortune, sister, I think they might well be the sort of men who take every opportunity to steal from those not in a position to fight back. That's why they're so wealthy.'

'I sincerely hope that you're mistaken. Where shall we hide this? I'm certain no one in our employ would steal from us but they might gossip about the gold and there are some in the village who wouldn't hesitate to break in for such a treasure.'

'Don't tell me, Demelza, I'm likely to reveal its whereabouts when in my cups. I'm going to rouse my lazy brother and I suggest that you hide this whilst I'm gone.'

She waited until he'd clumped up the stairs and then crept after him. The best place to put the money was in her own bedchamber – nobody came in there apart from Maisie to clean and collect the laundry and other less pleasant items.

The gold had to be somewhere that even Maisie wouldn't find it. This wasn't as simple as it sounded as the girl's duties meant she had to clean thoroughly every week and collect the chamber pot each morning and return it to its position under the bed.

The first place anyone would look would be her wooden coffer where her gowns were carefully folded. Then she remembered that the pretty landscape, one of her own creations, had been hung where it

was to cover a hole in the wall. This would be an ideal place to secrete the bags as nobody but herself was aware of it.

Before hiding the money she removed a dozen gold coins which she was confident would clear all their outstanding bills and keep them solvent for the next few weeks.

It was a matter of moments to remove the watercolour and push the bags in the hole that had appeared when a clump of plaster had fallen from the wall. She'd thrown her boot at it in a fit of pique a few years ago. Not wishing her parents to discover her bad behaviour she'd never mentioned what had happened to anyone.

Satisfied that even the most determined burglar would never discover the hiding place she hurried to her mother's room to assist her to get up and bring her the very welcome news that their financial difficulties were over.

This time she ignored the fact that the room was still in darkness and that her mama had shown no sign of wishing to get up despite the fact that it was now late morning. She threw back the curtains and opened the shutters letting in what little light there was.

'I don't feel at all well today, my dear, please close the curtains and the shutters and let me sleep in peace.'

She went immediately to her mother's side. 'I need to see you first, Mama, and then I'll close them again.'

Her mother's complexion was even paler than usual and when Demelza placed her hand on her forehead she was shocked to find it hot.

'You have a fever, Mama, so you must stay where you are and I'll send Johnny to fetch the doctor. We have the wherewithal to pay him now. Mr Somiton brought us sufficient gold to keep us until he recovers the rest of the money.'

Her mother appeared disinterested in this news which was a sure sign she was very poorly indeed. 'Do you have any aches and pains? Do you feel nauseous?'

'I just feel unwell but not as if I'm going to cast up my accounts. I'm sure whatever it is will soon pass if I'm left to rest in peace.'

Hastily Demelza plunged the room back into almost darkness and

tiptoed out. She could hear the boys, who insisted on sharing a chamber even though there were three rooms spare, talking behind their door. She knocked on it loudly and was bid to enter.

Quickly she told them the situation and Johnny looked grave. 'I don't understand how our mother can have caught some disease or another as she never leaves the house and no one comes here to see her anymore.'

'It matters not how she became unwell, what matters now is that we get her back on her feet. God willing Doctor Henwood will be at home and not already on a visit.'

'Is there anything I can do whilst Johnny's gone, Demelza?'

'Just get dressed and do something useful for a change. Joe and Ed have far too much to do as it is. Make sure there's enough firewood in the store in case the weather worsens and we cannot go to the barn and cut more.'

'Johnny said we've enough to pay our bills and that we're likely to get the remainder. Do you intend to re-employ those that you let go earlier in the year?'

'I certainly do, but not until I'm certain we have the money we're owed. You and your brother can resume your studies in the new year if that's the case.'

'We've talked about it and have decided that whatever the outcome we prefer to stay here. I know neither of us have reached our majority but we're not comfortable with leaving you and Mama without the protection of a gentleman.'

She smiled at his comment. 'My dear, Pa was only here for a few months at a time and often away for more than a year. He was quite happy to leave us to fend for ourselves in his absence and I'm quite certain we can continue to do so once our finances are secure again. The first thing I intend to do is find a carriage and horses so that Mama can resume her visits.'

'Make sure that one of the team will also go under saddle as the others did. You've also been unable to ride these past few months.'

'I can walk easily to the village as it's no more than two miles and have done so when I needed to. However, it would be agreeable to

travel further afield again.'

\*

Richard had no difficulty gaining access to the inner sanctum of the bank. He only had to mention his name and there was much bowing, scraping and sycophantic smiling. He was ushered into a palatial office, no expense spared with the furnishings, and greeted by a non-descript individual. He was of middle years, middle height and with his fading grey hair and old-fashioned apparel looked nothing like the man he'd expected to see.

'I'm Richard Somiton.' He didn't add that he was delighted to make this person's acquaintance as it would be untrue.

'I'm Thomas Penrith, owner of this bank. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Mr Somiton?' Penrith gestured towards one of two comfortable seats in front of a roaring fire but Richard ignored this and took one of the plain wooden chairs that flanked the enormous desk.

He waited until the other man retreated to his place, facing him with the wooden expanse between them, before speaking.

'Captain Trenwith banked with you, is that not so?'

'Indeed it is. We were very sorry to hear of his sad passing.'

'Miss Trenwith has applied to you on several occasions for access to the money that my company deposited as recompense for his death. She was told that Captain Trenwith's account is empty.'

If he'd announced that he was about to fly to the moon the man could not have looked more startled.

'Empty? That cannot be. Not only would he have the money from your company he also had several thousand pounds in various bonds and investments held here.'

'If that's the case then why was she told there was nothing? Why has the family been struggling to survive and obliged to sell their carriage and horses in order to pay their way?'

'This is most distressing. Please, Mr Somiton, forgive me whilst I go in search of the necessary papers. You must understand that it's not I that had control of this account – I've not looked at it myself since we inherited Captain Trenwith's account when we bought these

premises two years ago.'

Richard stood up. 'Might I enquire who has been responsible for Captain Trenwith's account?' He spoke quietly but the menace in his tone was immediately detected. He watched the colour drain from the man's face.

'I don't know exactly, Mr Somiton, allow me to make these enquiries. I promise you that matters will be put right immediately.'

Penrith moved around the desk and was about to head for the door. Richard stepped in front of him. 'The family has suffered hardship unnecessarily; Mrs Trenwith has become ill with the worry. How do you intend to put that right?'

'Financial recompense will be commensurate with the damages done.' The man still hadn't volunteered the information Richard was determined to elicit.

'Letters were written, Miss Trenwith came in person on more than one occasion and was turned from the door. What value do you put on that?'

'I know nothing about those visits or the letters. I told you, sir, that I had no direct oversight of the accounts.' The man was visibly trembling.

'Are you telling me that someone in your employ has stolen the money without anyone being aware of it? I doubt that any of your other depositors will be pleased to hear such news. There will be a run on your bank, Mr Penrith, which will not only ruin you but others also. I've no wish for that to happen.'

'Then what is it you wish me to do apart from restoring the missing money to the account as well as adding a very substantial sum in the hope that it will compensate for the distress caused?'

'I wish the name of the person or persons who perpetrated this. No answer? Then I'll help you out with this. Your son, David, is who you're protecting, isn't it?'

## Chapter Four

Demelza tried to persuade her mother to eat some lightly buttered toast but had no success. ‘Please, at least drink the tea.’ She held the cup against the invalid’s lips and was relieved to see half of it was drunk. ‘There, you can rest now and I’ll not disturb you until the doctor arrives. Are you quite sure you don’t wish to use the commode whilst I’m here?’

‘No, I’m quite comfortable. Run along, my dear, and take care of the boys for me.’

Her mother’s voice was so faint it was barely audible. This wasn’t like the other bouts of ill-health; she feared it was something more serious and prayed the patient would have the strength to fight it off knowing that things were better.

Silas was waiting anxiously outside for news from her. She decided that it would be better if only she entered the room just in case the illness was contagious.

‘How is she? Is she any better?’

‘She’s no worse and drank half her tea. It’s probably nothing to worry about but the doctor will tell us when he comes. I have a task for you – will you go to the village and see if there are any tasty treats at the shop that might encourage Mama to eat?’

‘I’ll go immediately. I’ll harness Bruno to the cart so I can bring back as much as I can find. What about one of the steak and ale pies from The Jolly Sailor? Bess bakes today.’

These pies were legendary and exactly what they all needed after being on such short commons for so long. ‘Yes, get two so we have



enough for everyone and some left over for tomorrow. Buy a gill of brandy from the inn. A little in some tea might be of benefit to Mama.'

'What about four pints of fresh prawns if there are any in this weather?'

'Yes, but I think it unlikely the shrimpers will have been out. See what you can find – a large joint of beef would be wonderful as we've only had chicken and fish these past few months.'

She offered him some money but he said he had more than enough with the guinea she'd given him and it would be his pleasure to treat the family. She accompanied him to the back door and was pleased to see there were no ominous black clouds rolling in from the sea and the sky was clear and bright blue.

Perhaps Ed's ominous predictions about snow and storms were unfounded. He was usually accurate but her own eyes told her on this occasion he was wrong.

A little over an hour after Johnny had set out to find the doctor, he returned. The gentleman accompanying him was a handsome man in his thirties – he was a radical and disapproved of by many of the richer residents in the area but she would have no other attending to the family as he was an excellent physician.

'Doctor Henwood, thank you for coming so promptly. My mother has been of low spirits these past few months but this is different. She has no energy at all and has a fever.'

'Has she been down to the village recently?'

'My mother hasn't left the house for weeks, Doctor Henwood, so the answer to your question is no. However, everyone in this household has at some time been in there for one reason or another and she has then been in contact with us. Nobody has been unwell or shown the same symptoms.' She followed him up the stairs – he'd visited them more than once over the past year so knew the way without direction.

'I take it that there's something infectious in the cottages down there. Surely, it's not possible that my mother has contracted an illness from one of us when we're perfectly well?'

He paused at the door. 'It's been my experience that a person can

be a carrier of a disease without having the symptoms themselves.'

'Mama, the doctor has come to see you.'

'How kind of him to come so quickly. I do have a headache; my throat is a little sore but apart from that I feel better than I did first thing this morning.'

Demelza hurried to the windows and quickly drew back the curtains and opened the shutters on one of them letting in sufficient light for the doctor to examine the patient.

He was thorough, asked questions and spoke reassuringly. He was a modern physician and didn't hold with the old-fashioned practice of bleeding patients, for which she was grateful.

She knew from his previous visits that he liked to wash his hands after an examination and there was warm water in the jug, and basin and clean towel ready waiting. Whilst he was busy she persuaded her mother to drink half a glass of boiled water and then made her comfortable.

The doctor never discussed his findings within earshot of the patient so she didn't bother to ask him his opinion until they were downstairs.

'Mrs Trenwith, I think, is just suffering from one of the normal winter ailments. It has laid her low because of her inactivity and poor spirits over the past months. Continue to do as you're doing and I'm confident she'll recover soon enough. Don't hesitate to call me back if there's a deterioration in her condition.'

'Thank you, Doctor Henwood, for coming so promptly. Mr Somiton and his man have come from London to sort out the problem of our missing inheritance. Things will be better from now on and I intend to purchase a carriage and horses so my mother can resume her morning calls.'

He smiled wryly. 'I doubt that you'll persuade my wife to part with your carriage and horses, but I'll ask her for you. I do know that Squire Johnson has just taken delivery of a new carriage especially made for him in Bodmin and is, at this very moment, in the process of purchasing a fine pair of geldings to pull it for him.'

'Then I'll send my brother directly to the squire and see if a deal

cannot be made to buy the carriage that he no longer has use for.'

There was no mention of his fee – the invoice would arrive in due course and would be paid promptly. Her brother had been lurking in the drawing room listening to the exchange.

'I'll go at once and speak to Squire Johnson,' Johnny said.

'Do you know the equipage and horses that might be available?' She had a vague recollection of seeing a small, well-maintained vehicle and two black geldings drawing it.

'You forget that Paul Johnson was at school with us, we're familiar with the carriage and have even travelled in it a couple of times. It will be ideal. I know that one of the team goes under saddle as well.'

'Strike a good bargain, Johnny, but don't seem too eager. Until Mr Somiton returns with the news that what we're owed has been returned to us we cannot complete the deal. Mama's small annuity has kept us from the poorhouse but without a regular income we'll still have to be careful.'

Her brothers shrugged into their riding coats, rammed hats on their heads and wrapped mufflers around their faces. The sun might be shining, the sky blue, but the late November weather was far from clement and the wind from the sea was bitter.

'Don't forget the silver that Silas and I added to the family coffers,' Johnny said with a grin.

'I think it best if we all put that incident aside. It's only three miles to Penhaligon so you can easily accomplish the journey and return long before dark.'

\*

Richard loomed over Mr Penrith knowing his size, his expression, should be enough to elicit the information he wanted.

'Please, sir, I give you my word that as soon as I have the evidence you require that I'll bring it to you personally. I cannot believe that my son would be involved in something so nefarious. He is somewhat wild, but a good businessman and wouldn't risk everything we've built together for so small a sum.'

'Then I can take the news to Mrs Trenwith that her fortune has been restored to her with interest and compensation?'

‘You can indeed, Mr Somiton. I cannot recall exactly the value of the investments that Captain Trenwith had lodged with us but I’m certain it was in excess of two thousand guineas. You can tell the dear lady that there are now three thousand guineas in the family account and Miss Trenwith will now be received with the respect that she’s due.’

‘That will do for the moment, thank you, Mr Penrith. But the matter is far from over – I came here not only to restore the money stolen from the Trenwith family but to bring the perpetrators to justice.’

With that threat hanging in the air he strode out satisfied that he’d achieved far more than he’d expected from one visit.

‘Manson, did you manage to hire a carriage?’

‘I did, sir.’ A gust of freezing wind almost took them from their feet.

‘I think it might be wise to take our luggage with us. It would be unconscionable to be stranded overnight without even a clean stock to my name.’

An hour later Richard was on his way. The vehicle Manson had hired was an open cart pulled by a cob with little inclination to move at more than a slow trot.

He was reluctant to apply the whip as the horse was doing his best in difficult circumstances. ‘It’s fortunate that this beast has a thick coat – something more refined wouldn’t cope well with the freezing conditions.’ He’d been forced to raise his voice so it could be heard over the squally wind that whistled around their heads.

Whereas it had taken less than an hour to cover the distance from Bodmin to Seaview on horseback it took double the length of time in the cart. He was already regretting his impulsive decision to come this afternoon as the sky had darkened, occasional flurries of snow indicated the weather was rapidly worsening.

He was now pleased that he’d sent Manson to purchase a selection of items that would hopefully not make their arrival and enforced stay something to cause consternation in the kitchen. He’d brought with

him sufficient to feed a dozen mouths for several days and all of it of the best quality available in such a benighted place as Bodmin.

The two outside men greeted them with surprise. 'Didn't expect no one else to come today, sir, right bad weather for visiting folk,' one of them said with a surly look. However, when they saw the largesse he'd got with him their demeanour changed. It was appalling that this well-to-do family had been so lacking in money that food had been short.

'Would you be good enough to bring the sacks and boxes to the kitchen?'

'Right happy to do that, sir. The young master fetched back two pies from the inn a while ago. I reckon we'll be well fed tonight.'

Richard left the two of them to take care of the horse and unload the cart and then he and Manson walked around to the front door. He hammered on it knowing their appearance, like two snowmen, might be viewed with dismay.

The nervous housemaid answered his demand. She clung onto the edge of the door trying to stop it from banging open and Manson added his considerable weight to the task.

'Come in, Mr Somiton. The mistress ain't well and the doctor's been. The young mistress will be that surprised to see you twice in one day.'

Not wishing to remain conversing with a servant on the doorstep in what was rapidly turning into a blizzard, Richard stepped around the girl into the spacious entrance hall. Manson followed him, one bag under his arm the other in his free hand.

The lantern he was holding swayed, sending flickering golden arcs of light across the boards. Miss Trenwith and her brothers appeared from the family parlour.

'Good gracious, Mr Somiton, Mr Manson, you are most unexpected guests but welcome nonetheless. Maisie, take the gentlemen's bags upstairs and make up two bedchambers. Light the fires in both.'

The girl nodded and vanished up the staircase in a swirl of petticoats.

'I beg your pardon for arriving, for the second time, unannounced.

As you can see, we came prepared to stay here if necessary. I hope you don't think that presumptuous of me.'

'Not at all, we're delighted you've come as from your demeanour you've brought us the best possible news.'

Manson took their greatcoats and other outdoor garments and followed the maid up the stairs leaving him to join the Trenwiths in front of a much-needed fire.

'First I must enquire after the health of Mrs Trenwith. Your girl said that the doctor came this morning.'

'Mama's sleeping comfortably, Doctor Henwood said it was nothing to be concerned about and that she would recover in a few days and be up and about again.'

'I'm glad to hear that. I took the liberty of bringing items to restock your larder as I thought it very likely Manson and I would be obliged to stay here at least overnight.'

'That's kind of you, sir, and much appreciated. Until the weather improves I cannot send to Bodmin for what we need, so your contribution is most welcome.' She smiled and gestured that he took a seat. 'Tonight we have a treat for you. Silas went to Pencarrow and fetched us two magnificent steak and ale pies. We shall have prawns and freshly baked bread first and Dolly, our cook-housekeeper, is making a cake for dessert.'

For the girl to be so thrilled to be eating such plain fare made him even more determined to make the bastard who'd caused the family to suffer pay dearly for his misdeeds.

'I cannot wait. I detected an appetising smell as we came in. Before we eat I must tell you that Mr Penrith had no knowledge of your financial circumstances. He was shocked when I informed him and has immediately put three thousand guineas into your account and assures me that next time you visit you will be treated with the respect you deserve.'

This information was received with delight and excitement and none of them mentioned anything about bringing the culprits to justice – they were just relieved to have things back as they should be.

They talked about the unseasonable weather, the purchase of

another carriage and a variety of other matters until the maid came in to tell them that dinner was served in the dining room.

By the end of the evening he'd come to like all three of the Trenwiths and decided that he'd not return to Somiton until he was quite certain the family could resume their comfortable existence. Johnny and Silas showed him the respect he was entitled to and, although detecting a certain wildness in the older boy, he could find no other fault with either of them.

If they didn't wish to return to their education then he would make it his business to set them on the right path as Demelza – they were now on familiar terms – told him she was concerned they were getting into bad company and fraternising with the smugglers.

He retired that night content with the day and with the company. The longer he remained at Seaview the happier he'd be.

\*

Demelza opened her eyes wondering what had disturbed her slumber. She was always up with the lark but as she'd retired so late last night she had expected to sleep in a little longer today. She lay still for a moment surprised that the room was somewhat lighter than usual.

She tumbled out of bed and ran barefooted to the window. She pulled back the curtains and opened the shutters. Snow – there must be more than two feet of it. No one would be going anywhere today and probably not for the next few days.

Ed and Joe had warm, comfortable accommodation in a small cottage nearby but ate in the kitchen with Dolly and Maisie after the family had finished. She was quite sure they would wade through the snow however deep it was in order to be fed.

Hastily she closed both the shutters and the curtains not wishing to be seen at the window in her nightgown. She smiled at her foolishness as there was unlikely to be anybody on the coastal path today. Even the smugglers and the revenue men would be remaining inside in this weather.

She hugged herself and skipped around the room. Richard would be unable to leave this morning as planned and the thought of having

him staying for another few days filled her with excitement.

Initially she'd thought him arrogant, unpleasant even, but had rapidly revised her opinion last night. He was charming, handsome, funny and made her hot all over in a most peculiar way. Her brothers were equally under his spell and she was hopeful that spending further time in his company would persuade them to continue their education or at least make a decision as to their future. As soon as they understood that they would have to work for their living the happier she'd be.

The washstand was adjacent to the window and the water had ice on the top. She shivered and decided her ablutions would be minimal this morning. Her breath steamed in front of her. She couldn't remember it ever being so cold.

This morning she added the extra layer of a red flannel petticoat under her gown. Warmly dressed she hurried downstairs and into the kitchen which was always warm. The range was left in overnight. Maisie was just raking it out and getting it going again.

'My, you gave me a fright, Miss Demelza. I don't reckon the chooks will want to come out in this nasty white stuff.'

'I don't intend to let them out until later. The men must clear a path first. I'm going to light the fire in the drawing room and the family parlour. I don't want our guests to be cold when they come down. Then I'll tend to my mother. Make sure the kettle's on as she'll want some tea as soon as she's awake.'

The girl didn't argue or protest that it was her job. Demelza had been sharing these tasks since the other maid had left a few months ago. The only room that would be warm was mama's as this fire had been banked up and left burning.

Leaving the two downstairs fires ablaze she refilled her basket with logs from the inside store that was now rapidly depleting. The boys should have refilled it yesterday, but too late to repine. They'd have to do it in the snow as the house couldn't be allowed to get cold.

'Allow me, my dear, this isn't something you should be doing yourself.' Richard reached around her and removed the heavy basket from her grasp.



‘There’s no one else...’

‘Your brothers should be up and doing the heavy work. It’s their job to take care of you and your mother not the other way round.’

‘They’ve become wilder as the months have passed but now things are to return to normal I’m hoping they’ll agree to continue their education. Johnny should have gone to Oxford last year to study law and Silas would have gone this year to study divinity.’

He gave a snort of laughter. ‘I cannot see Johnny as a lawyer and certainly not Silas as a curate. Would you like me to buy them their colours? Although the war with Bonaparte is over officers are always needed somewhere, even if it’s in the militia.’

They were now outside her mother’s bedchamber. ‘I would be against it if there was a war on but possibly in peacetime it might be the perfect solution.’

She knocked on the door, not expecting to receive a reply, and pushed it open. Richard followed her and quietly placed the basket of logs by the grate. The room was warm, unlike the rest of the house. Mama was asleep so she tiptoed across and knelt down to attend to the fire.

## Chapter Five

Richard was about to leave the room but there was something about the still form under the comforter that alarmed him. Saying nothing to Demelza he walked across and knew at once that he was right. Mrs Trenwith had died during the night. Her skin was cold – she'd been dead for some hours.

Carefully he drew the blankets over her face and moved away. The doctor had assured them there was nothing to worry about and yet there was now a corpse in the bed to deny his words.

'Richard, you shouldn't really be in here,' Demelza said in a whisper.

He moved to her side and placed his hands on her shoulders. 'Sweetheart, I've the worst possible news for you.'

She understood immediately. She surged to her feet and ran to the bed. He'd expected her to cry, to attempt to rouse her mother but she did neither of these things. She stood by the bed looking down in silence, making no attempt to pull back the sheet and look at the face of the dead woman.

He stood behind her and put his arms around her waist drawing her close. She remained stiff within his hold but he didn't release her knowing she'd need his support and comfort once the dreadful reality was fully understood.

'There are several feet of snow outside, Richard, I can't send for the undertaker. I don't know how to lay her out and we don't have a coffin to put her in.'

'She'll be fine where she is for the moment. Come away, come

downstairs with me. I'll take care of things.'

He guided her from the room, perturbed at her calmness. Manson was outside. There was no need to explain to his valet what had taken place.

'I know what to do, sir, take the young lady down and I'll see to everything. I'll let the boys know once things are arranged in there.'

Richard nodded knowing the first thing to be done was to douse the fire and open the windows to cool the room. How the devil had this doctor got it so wrong? If Demelza had realised how ill her mother was then she would have remained with her and the poor woman wouldn't have died on her own.

The family room was warm and welcoming and he took her there. After gently pressing her into one of the padded armchairs he went to the kitchen.

'Your mistress has died. Can you search out suitable garments for the family? Presumably they still have what was worn when the captain died last year.'

'Oh my, what a dreadful thing. Doctor Henwood was so sure it was nothing serious. Nobody will be going anywhere until this snow has thawed. I'll speak to Ed and Joe – I'm sure they can construct something suitable until the real thing can be fetched from Bodmin.'

'Excellent. This house is in mourning. The shutters remain closed, voices lowered at all times.'

The housekeeper nodded. She was a sensible woman and he was confident she could carry out her duties satisfactorily.

'My man is upstairs with your mistress but it would be better if you assisted him. Get the girl to bring tea and toast to us as soon as possible.'

Demelza was still sitting where he'd put her, staring into the fire. Her features were composed but her eyes were blank. This wasn't a good sign. If he'd already rued the fact that poor Mrs Trenwith had slipped away unnoticed then she too must be dwelling on that.

He had no option but to take control of the household until the uncle could be contacted. Sir Hugo was now legal guardian to these three and, despite the rift in the family, would have to step up and do

his duty by them.

As soon as the snow cleared he would send Manson to Bodmin with a letter, and it could go by express. Another must go to Adam at Somiton to inform him of the circumstances. His brother would understand that he couldn't return until matters were settled and Demelza and her brothers had been conveyed to their new home.

First they must get through the funeral which, obviously, couldn't take place until there was a thaw. Possibly there was a family plot – he would ask the housekeeper – but not now. His task at the moment was to take care of Demelza, Johnny and Silas and offer what comfort and support he could at this difficult time.

The maid came in with a tray of tea and the toast he'd asked for. He gestured that she put it down and leave him to deal with it.

'Sweetheart, drink this. I'll hold the cup for you.'

She blinked and then her eyes focused. 'Thank you, Richard, but I'm quite capable of holding my own cup.' Her voice was even, no sign of grief apparent in it.

He offered her a plate with toast on it and she took it without comment. She ate two slices – more than he did – and he was mystified at her calmness. He decided to say something to elicit some sort of reaction. It couldn't be good for her to hold her grief inside like this.

'Demelza, is there a family plot?'

'There is – it's in a small wood behind the house. My mother died from a broken heart, you know, I've been expecting it to happen at any time these past few months.'

He was about to deny that anyone could die of such a thing but instead nodded. 'She was frail and when a person is so vulnerable even something trivial can prove fatal.'

She put down her cup so hard it rattled in the saucer. 'If you persist in stating the obvious, sir, I must ask you to go elsewhere and leave me to my thoughts.'

It was as if a different young woman was talking to him – someone he didn't recognise, not the girl he'd come to like so well over the past two days.

‘What would you like me to do? I’ll remain here until I’m certain that you and your brothers have your lives in order.’

She ignored his statement and nodded at her empty cup. Immediately he got up and refilled it.

‘There’s some brandy in the bureau. Would you be kind enough to add some to my tea? I feel it would revive me somewhat after the shock.’

He could do with a double measure himself to steady his nerves but on seeing how small the bottle was decided he would take none for himself. He tipped a generous amount into the tea and handed it to her.

‘Demelza, your mother has just died. Your brothers will be informed at any minute and I need to know what you wish me to do to help you all get through this.’

‘I blame the man who stole our money for my mother’s death. I wish to see that person incarcerated or transported. If you wish to be of some assistance then do that for us.’

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Richard was looking at her strangely and she didn’t blame him one jot. It was as if another person had inhabited her body and was controlling her. Why wasn’t she in tatters, prostrate with grief for the loss of her beloved parent? Crying would be a release from this hideous pressure but all she could think about was revenge. Not on the doctor for his misdiagnosis but on whoever had stolen their money and caused her mother’s decline.

‘I have it in hand, my dear, and can assure you the transgressor will receive the punishment he deserves. Will you allow me to take control of the household until you’re feeling...’

She interrupted him. ‘I’m perfectly capable of running my own household. I’ve been doing so for the past year and will continue to do so in future.’

He looked at her and was obviously about to say something but reconsidered. ‘I thought to find you a personal maid, a valet for your brothers as well as two extra inside servants and at least that number outside.’

For a moment his words made no sense, then she nodded. ‘That would be helpful, thank you. If you speak to the housekeeper she’ll give you the whereabouts of suitable candidates. If you could send Manson to speak to the vicar and let Doctor Henwood know, that too would be useful.’

There was the sound of heavy footsteps thumping down the stairs. She jumped to her feet waiting for her brothers to burst in. They ignored Richard and came to her. She stood within their embrace for a few moments and then moved aside.

They had the room to themselves – Richard had taken the hint and gone elsewhere. ‘We’re orphans, boys, but we can manage our lives without interference from anyone else. Richard is going to continue his enquiries until whoever caused Mama’s death is brought to justice.’

‘The doctor said she was going to make a full recovery – don’t you blame him?’ Johnny asked.

‘No, the deterioration in her health was caused directly by the thief. I’ll not rest until he has been found.’

She quickly told them what Richard intended to do about making life easier for them and they looked relieved they didn’t have to step up and take control. ‘If the weather clears quickly then the remainder of the fields can be ploughed which will improve our finances next year,’ Silas said as he drained the last of the tea and finished off the toast.

‘I was thinking the same thing. Mama wanted to be with Pa – I’ve been expecting her to slip away to join him every day that passed.’

‘Richard offered to buy me my colours, I’m going to take him up on that,’ Johnny said. ‘Silas, you must continue your education. You have an interest in farming and would make an excellent estate manager for one of the *ton*.’

As they were talking she realised they’d all been expecting their parent to die and although desperately sad, it was almost a relief to no longer be permanently on edge. The grief, the mourning, that would come later – after all they had a further year ahead of them. She would be wearing black for the next six months and then a further six

in lavender.

‘Excuse me, boys, I’m going to change into something more suitable. I suggest that you do the same. Striped waistcoats must be put aside from today.’

She could hear movement in the bedchamber opposite to hers and closed her mind to what it might mean. She thanked God that Manson had been staying in the house as without his help she doubted Dolly would have been able to do what was necessary.

Snow deadened the sounds but even so she could hear someone hammering nails into wood and the scrape of metal on the cobbles. One of the men was making the temporary coffin and the other was clearing the snow.

She blinked back tears – now was not the time to give way – she must stay strong for her brothers and set them a good example. Richard had arrived at an opportune time in their lives and she rather thought that Mama would have died this week regardless of the fact that she’d contracted a fever.

Not eating more than a few mouthfuls each day for months, taking no exercise, staying indoors – all these had contributed to the decline that had led to the inevitable death. She’d done her best to encourage Mama in every way she could but her entreaties had been in vain.

It seemed only a short time ago that she’d been wearing black for her father and now she was putting it on again. She scraped her unruly red hair back in the most unflattering style she could manage and pinned it in place.

Her mourning gown was black bombazine, with high neck and long sleeves and made in the old-fashioned way. This meant that the waistline was where it should be. She’d made herself two new gowns this year both in the modern style with the waistline under her bosom and she much preferred the freedom this gave her.

Richard met her at the bottom of the stairs. Obviously, he hadn’t had anything suitable to change into but he had fashioned a black armband from something and was wearing that.

‘The snow’s already melting, Demelza, I’m hoping that by tomorrow Manson can take messages to the vicar, the undertaker and

the doctor. He'll then head for Bodmin and get my letters sent by express.'

'I'm glad that you're here, Richard, as you can accompany my brothers to the church. I cannot attend as females must remain at home.'

'Then why don't you have a graveside service? Then you can be there with the boys.'

'I'll discuss it with them and let you know.' She felt unaccountably tired, was finding it difficult to marshal her thoughts and hold a sensible conversation.

'Come and sit with me in the family parlour. There are things we need to talk about.'

Talking was the last thing she wanted to do – but he put his arm around her shoulders and gently moved her in the direction he suggested. She slumped into the nearest chair and closed her eyes. If she pretended to be asleep then he wouldn't bother her with plans and preparations.

A cushion was slipped behind her head and then a rug put over her knees as if she was an elderly lady. She wanted to protest that she was perfectly fine but her voice refused to work. From a distance she heard him talking to her brothers on the far side of the room but couldn't concentrate on what was being said.

She was almost crushed by her grief. Why had Mama not made more effort to get better? Things were going to be different now they had their fortune restored. Hadn't her brothers just purchased a carriage and horses for Mama to resume visiting friends?

She jolted awake. 'Letters will have to be sent to everyone in the vicinity. Mama was well liked and had many friends even though she'd not seen them for several months.'

'There will be a notice in the newspaper. That should be sufficient.'

Richard was on his own. She didn't have the energy to ask where her brothers were.

'Let me take care of everything for you, Demelza, you've carried the burden of this family for far too long.'



‘Why should you do that? You’re a stranger to us – we only met you three days ago.’

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‘I’m doing it because it’s the right thing to do. None of you are of age and it makes things so much simpler for everyone if I’m responsible for the necessary arrangements.’ Richard had sent the boys out to help clear the snow. Exercise would take their minds off what had taken place. The three of them were still in shock – the tears and recriminations would come later.

‘I can’t concentrate on anything. My mind is wandering. I don’t know why I’m so tired when I’ve only been up an hour or so.’

‘Don’t fight the fatigue, my dear, let nature take control. Your brothers needed something physical to do. You need to sleep.’

He hated to see her so subdued. None of them realised that their situation was going to change so drastically. Sir Hugo Trenwith was now their legal guardian and had control over their lives. A letter would go by express tomorrow informing him of this.

She closed her eyes and he watched her drift off. Even with dark shadows under her eyes and dressed in that hideous black gown she was still a beautiful young woman. He continued to write the letters that must be delivered tomorrow and then his hand jerked sending a stream of ink blots across the paper.

He’d only briefly glimpsed Mrs Trenwith as he pulled the covers over her face. She didn’t have red hair, neither had the captain or the boys – where did Demelza get her extraordinary colouring from?

He sanded the paper in the hope that this would rectify the mess he’d made but when he tipped the sheet he saw he’d have to begin again. The small escritoire he was using wasn’t meant for a gentleman of his size but he had no intention of leaving the girl alone.

He’d just finished writing to his brother when there was a tap on the door. He got to his feet, not wishing to call out and wake the sleeping girl, and walked over. Manson was waiting to speak to him and he stepped outside into the passageway and closed the door quietly behind him.

‘Everything’s as it should be upstairs, sir. The men have brought

up a decent enough box and I've transferred the lady to it. I thought she should be laid out in the drawing room so the family can keep vigil.'

'Yes, do that. I made sure that no fire was lit in it today in anticipation of this. Do you require my assistance to transport the coffin?'

'No, sir, the men and I can manage fine. The lads are making a splendid job of clearing away the snow. Mind you – I reckon it'll be gone tomorrow as the temperature's rising rapidly.'

'I'll need you to take some letters as soon as you think the cart will get through. I'd suggest that you took one of the boys' horses but neither of them is up to your weight.'

'I thought to ride the cob – it's a sturdy beast and I'll make better time astride than I would with the ribbons in my hand.'

'Do that. Return it to the livery stable and return on one of the hacks we hired – bring mine along with you.'

'Then the cart will be left here and you'll have to pay for it.'

'That's true. My wits are wandering today. Come back on the cob and that will solve the problem.'

'It's a good thing we brought all our belongings. I'll pay the shot and cancel the remainder of our booking, shall I?'

'Yes, we'll not be staying at the inn again. Once things are settled here, we'll catch the next stage and not stay again in Bodmin.'

He re-entered the chamber and checked on the sleeping occupant. She had slipped to one side and looked decidedly uncomfortable slumped in a chair. Quickly he removed the detritus from the long sofa and transferred her. She didn't stir and he thought the longer she slept the easier it would be for her to deal with what was coming.

He'd intended to invite the entire family to come for the Christmas festivities at Somiton and then for Demelza to make her come out with the other girls in London in the spring. Mrs Trenwith's untimely death had changed all that. Sir Hugo now had the responsibility and he must step aside.

He would be sorry to say goodbye to this family. In the few days he'd known them they'd become dear to him. He doubted he would

see any of them again once their uncle, or his representative, arrived to take charge. Their lives would move on and so must he, but he'd never forget his brief interlude in Cornwall.

## Chapter Six

Doctor Henwood appeared two days after mama's demise and was most apologetic. The snow had gone apart from a few miserable piles in the corners of the farmyard. Demelza wanted to cry but was frozen inside. She carried on functioning as normal, as did her brothers, and she was sure Richard thought them a strange, unfeeling family.

Manson had taken the letters and then returned leading a horse for Richard to ride. The valet would have to drive the cob back in the cart when they eventually left. The house was eerily silent and unpleasantly dark with the curtains and shutters closed. Even the lurcher sensed something wasn't right and slunk about the place with his tail between his legs.

The funeral was mercifully brief and somehow she felt better once the coffin was in the ground. No one had been invited and only Richard, her brothers, his valet and the servants had been present when the curate conducted the service.

On their return from the woods she discovered she was now in possession of a personal maid, her brothers had a shared valet and there were two further indoor servants to help Dolly and Maisie.

Her maid would have little to do as she only possessed the one mourning gown and intended to keep her hair in the unflattering style she'd adopted. They now used the dining room and Manson ate in the kitchen with the staff.

Two days after the funeral they were sitting in the drawing room together. Her brothers had gone to collect the carriage – although they didn't really need it now.

‘Richard, thank you for arranging everything so smoothly. Life here is going to be so much easier with the extra servants. The two outside men have already started ploughing the fields that were missed earlier.’

He didn’t answer immediately. In fact, he seemed distracted and constantly looking out of the window as if expecting callers to arrive at any moment.

‘I beg your pardon, my dear, what did you say?’

‘I was just thanking you for getting things organised for us. I’m sure you’ll want to be getting back to Somiton soon – you’ve been here more than a week already. If you don’t depart you might not get back in time for the Christmas festivities.’

‘I’ll go when your uncle comes. I’ll not leave you until then.’

She was aghast. ‘My uncle? What is he to do with anything? Please don’t tell me that you sent word to him about my mother’s death?’

‘I had no choice, Demelza, he’s your only living relative and your guardian.’

‘Pa and he hadn’t spoken for decades. We want nothing to do with him. You had no right to interfere in that way.’ She was on her feet and glaring at him, daring him to contradict, waiting for his abject apologies.

Slowly he stood up, his expression sad, and shrugged. ‘You are all underage. Whilst your mother was alive things were different – people could pretend that she was in charge. Now she’s gone you can’t stay here on your own.’

She wasn’t a violent person but his calm indifference incensed her to the point of madness. She snatched up the heavy, silver coffeepot from the tray and hurled it at him. She didn’t wait to see if her aim was true but ran from the room.

For the first time since her beloved parent had died she was crying. This dreadful news, the thought that she would be under the control of a stranger, someone that father hadn’t liked, was too much to bear.

She would never forgive Richard for doing this to her and her brothers. He would ride away satisfied he’d done his duty and leave

them to whatever fate this uncle had in store for them. Her maid, Jenny, sprung to her feet as Demelza burst in.

‘Lock the door. Open it to no one.’

‘Yes, miss.’ The girl slammed it shut and turned the key.

Demelza flung herself on the bed, prostrate with grief. The tears she’d been holding back for her mother now poured forth and she sobbed uncontrollably.

Then to her astonishment she was gathered up and held in Richard’s arms. He carried her to the daybed and held her tight. He pulled the pins out of her hideous bun letting her hair fall free and immediately her headache eased a little.

‘I’m so sorry, sweetheart, I had no choice. I promise you I won’t let anything bad happen – if Sir Hugo proves unsuitable to take charge of you then I’ll come up with another solution.’

He was running his fingers through her hair, rocking her back and forth as if she was a baby, and she needed the comfort he was offering. After some time she shuddered to a halt. When she raised her face he mopped it clean.

Only then did she see the huge coffee stain on his once immaculate waistcoat. ‘I’m sorry I threw the pot at you...’

‘So am I, sweetheart, as you’ve ruined my favourite waistcoat.’

‘How did you get in? Jenny locked the door.’

‘She opened it when I asked her to. I followed you because I was concerned, not because I was angry.’

He gently lifted her from his lap and stood up. ‘Are you well now? I shouldn’t be in here...’

Before she could answer the door slammed back and a gentleman, with identical colouring to herself, stormed in. It could be none other than her uncle. What an inopportune moment for him to announce himself.

‘What’s this I see? Entertaining a gentleman in your bedchamber, girl? I can only assume that you are Richard Somiton and intend to marry my niece.’

‘You are also in my bedchamber and I don’t intend to marry you.’

‘I am your uncle, girl, which is quite different as well you know.’

‘I don’t care who you are. Richard was offering me comfort – my maid was present at all times – and he has no intention of marrying me or I of marrying him.’

Richard squeezed her shoulder as he walked past. He stood between her and the man who’d come to ruin her life. ‘Sir Hugo, we are both *de trop*. Shall we go downstairs where we can talk without causing offence to Miss Trenwith?’

She watched as Richard moved forward forcing her uncle to back out whether he wished to or not. The door closed behind them and she collapsed on the *chaise longue* hardly able to comprehend what had just taken place.

‘My, miss, you’re the very image of that gentleman. No mistaking he’s your uncle – he could be your father.’

Demelza felt a weight settle on her chest. It had been twenty years since Pa and his brother had been in contact – she was approaching her twentieth birthday. Suddenly it all made sense. That horrible man must be her actual father and not the man she’d known and loved these past years. She’d always wondered why she looked so unlike her siblings or her parents and now she knew the reason.

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Richard having all but bundled Sir Hugo out of the bedchamber then moved swiftly behind him, gripped his arm and forced him to descend. He had a horrible suspicion that he’d made the most catastrophic error involving this man in the lives of these three youngsters.

He wasn’t going to marry Demelza because this man ordered him to – but if it was the only way to keep the three of them safe from him then he would do so in a heartbeat. Many marriages had begun with a much less auspicious start.

What damnable bad luck for the man to arrive at exactly that moment. Too late to repine – the milk was spilt – he would have to do his best to put things right without causing irreparable damage to all of them.

Nobody now wanted to sit in the drawing room after the coffin had been in there but he didn’t want this objectionable gentleman in

the family room so he marched him there.

‘Release me at once, you rogue, I’ll not be manhandled in this way. I am Sir Hugo Trenwith. This is my property now and you are trespassing. I’ll have you arrested.’

Before Richard could prevent him the man raised his voice and yelled for assistance. The front door flew open and three burly men burst in. He didn’t stand a chance. He was smashed to the floor without landing a blow himself. Then he was pinned to the ground and trussed like a pig for market.

He’d scarcely had time to draw breath when the tables were reversed. Manson, plus the four outside men, charged in and a bout of the most ferocious fisticuffs took place. The upshot was that Trenwith’s henchmen were unconscious and dragged out feet first to be locked in a freezing outhouse.

Manson released him and then pinned the all but gibbering Trenwith to his chair by putting his hands on his shoulders and pressing down hard.

‘I’ll have you hung by the neck. I’m a person of importance. You are a renegade and all of you will hang when the magistrate hears of your behaviour.’

‘Stow it, Trenwith, unless you wish me to gag you.’

Unfortunately, Johnny and Silas returned and walked in on the unpleasantness. They were intelligent lads and saw at once what was happening.

‘Is that our uncle you have there, Richard?’ Johnny asked and walked across with a sneer and poked the man with his toe.

‘Regrettably, he is. According to him he now owns this property and we are all trespassers.’

‘You and your man are the trespassers. These boys are my property. You, are you the oldest?’

Johnny looked at him for permission to answer and Richard nodded.

‘I am. And whatever you might think to the contrary, sir, this is my house. My father made it very clear in his will that it would come directly to me. You are the interloper, not Mr Somiton.’



‘Until you reach your majority, boy, it belongs to me. I am your guardian and have complete control over your lives from now on.’

This wasn’t going well and it was entirely his fault. ‘Johnny, Silas, would you mind going to your sister whilst I talk to this person?’

They both nodded and walked out commendably straight and he was proud of them. He could think of only one way he could prevent this abhorrent man from taking these three away with him. That man had the law on his side unless he did the unthinkable and actually married Demelza.

Sir Hugo folded his arms looking smug, knowing he had right on his side even though he’d behaved appallingly. Richard stared at him thoughtfully. Then something blindingly obvious resonated.

God’s teeth! How could he have been so stupid not to have seen it immediately. Demelza was this man’s daughter which complicated things even further. Maybe this wasn’t as straightforward as he’d thought.

He nodded at Manson and his man removed his hands. ‘Please ask the housekeeper to send refreshments in. I’m sure that Sir Hugo and I can talk like gentlemen with no further need for violence on either part.’

‘Very well, sir. I’ll check on the well-being of his men as well.’

Once they were private Richard picked up a wooden chair and placed it directly in front of his opponent.

‘Explain to me how Demelza is your image, Sir Hugo? I can think of only one explanation and that is that you violated...’

The man’s face crumpled and suddenly he was no longer belligerent but pathetic. ‘No, no you’ve got it wrong. I loved Sarah, we were to be married and anticipated our wedding vows by a day only. Then my brother returned from the sea and she changed her mind and ran away with him. I’d no idea until I saw her just now that I had a daughter.’

‘There’s more to this story than you’re revealing. If you were in love, why would she willingly go with someone else?’

Sir Hugo blew his nose noisily on his handkerchief before replying. ‘She and my brother had been childhood sweethearts, they

always intended to be wed but then he was reported lost at sea and she turned to me for comfort. I give you my word that I'd no idea my brother was still alive or I'd never have... never have seduced her as I did.'

'Tell me exactly what happened when your brother arrived unexpectedly the day before you were to marry.'

'He was furious with me, and rightly so, although at that point he'd no idea that I had lain with her. I wanted to be sure she wouldn't change her mind, refuse to marry me the next day. I'd been in love with her for years and she was fond of me – we would have had a happy marriage.' He sniffed and blew his nose a second time. 'She would have done better with me than she did with Bertram. He was away for more than he was home and he promised her he would give up his seafaring.'

'I rather think that when he discovered your perfidy his opinion changed. The woman he loved, and came home to, had betrayed him and now he was forced to live with the evidence. I rather think that his absences were a direct result, don't you?'

The man looked old and sad. 'I plied her with champagne and she was unable to resist. They left on what would have been my wedding day and were married a week later by special licence. Bertram cut off all contact with me and moved away. Until you wrote I'd no idea he had three children. I never married. Johnny is my heir. I am a wealthy, well-respected man, but lonely in my big house, and will take care of them whatever you might think to the contrary.'

Richard's animosity had faded during this speech and he thought he might have misjudged Sir Hugo. But if what he'd been told was true, then what had transpired earlier made no sense.

'Then why did you behave so badly? Why did you barge into the house without an invitation? And more to the point, why did you have with you three minions ready to do violence on your behalf?' He asked the question softly but he fixed the old man with an artful stare.

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Demelza had listened with dismay to the thumps, bangs and cries coming from downstairs. When her brothers knocked on the door she

had Jenny open it at once. She flung herself into their arms and they embraced.

‘I’ll never forgive Richard for involving that monster in our lives. We could have managed very well on our own.’

‘No, sister, we couldn’t. He had no choice. However much we might dislike it, Sir Hugo is our only living relative. You can hardly expect Richard to take charge of us indefinitely. He has a life of his own to return to and has done more than we could ever have expected to put things right,’ Johnny said firmly.

‘I think I’m that man’s illegitimate daughter. I always wondered where I got my extraordinary colouring from.’

‘Good grief, whatever made you think that? I expect we have a grandmother with red hair and you inherited your looks from her. How can you accuse our mother of behaving in that way?’ Silas stared at her with disapproval.

The band around her chest released and she could breathe again. ‘I didn’t think of that. I don’t know why my mind immediately jumped to the worst possible explanation. Pa was always loving and kind to me, he never treated me any differently to you. If what I’d believed was true then I’m certain our parents wouldn’t have been so happy together.’

Silas sprawled on her bed ignoring the fact that his boots were muddy. Johnny collapsed onto a chair. ‘Tell me exactly what took place up here. What led to the fight downstairs?’

When she’d finished they exchanged worried glances. ‘Can he make you marry Richard?’

‘He can’t make us do anything we don’t wish to do. I suppose Sir Hugo could make life difficult, ruin my reputation and Richard’s, but he can’t force us to exchange vows if we don’t wish to do so.’

‘He can make us accompany him. He has control of our finances. I won’t have access to any money until I’m one and twenty – not for another four years.’

‘Richard should never have informed him whatever you say. People around here know us – the bank had already said they would deal with me directly...’

‘Demelza, that was before Mama died. Everything changed when that happened. He had no choice and he couldn’t possibly have known how objectionable our uncle was going to be.’

‘If we stick together, we can get through this,’ Silas said but he didn’t sound convinced.

‘The more I think about it the less I like it. There’s only one alternative and that’s to run away together. I can travel in the carriage; you have your horses and there’s over two hundred guineas hidden behind that picture. I have mama’s jewellery and that’s worth another hundred guineas at least. Surely, we can live on that until you reach your majority, Johnny?’

‘If we sell the horses too, then we can get by. Silas and I must find employment too as even so large a sum won’t last for four years.’

Both of them looked interested in her suggestion. ‘We’ll have to be surreptitious. Get our belongings packed without alerting Richard or Sir Hugo. If we take Dawkins and your Jenny, they can travel inside with you,’ Johnny said.

‘Who’s going to drive the carriage?’

‘I think that Dawkins could manage that. He used to work as a groom before he became a manservant,’ Silas said.

‘We must leave at first light, boys, but up until then I’ll remain in my room pretending that I’m prostrate with grief. Can you dissemble to both Richard and that man?’

‘I think it might be better if we refuse to eat with him – behave like surly children and stomp off to our bedchamber in high dudgeon. What do you think, Silas?’

‘I’ll follow your lead, Johnny. It occurs to me that we ought to have a destination in mind. I expect there’ll be a hue and cry once they realise that we’ve gone.’

‘We can discuss that later. As long as we get half a day’s start then we should be safe from capture. I didn’t tell you, Demelza, that Sir Hugo brought with him three bully boys who are now languishing in an outhouse after attacking Richard.’

‘That man obviously came here expecting trouble and intended to drag us away by force if necessary. We’ll be doing Richard a favour by

vanishing. I wish we could tell him what we're planning but I don't want him to be implicated in our disappearance.'

'There's only one route out of Cornwall and we have to pass through the area in which Sir Hugo is quite possibly a magistrate. If we don't get there before he sends word then it will be in vain.'

Johnny looked sombre and for a moment she thought the whole scheme was impossible.

'What if the two of you go out after everyone's abed, sabotage the carriage and take the horses down to the village? You have friends there and they will keep them safe and then return them once we're at least day or two away.'

## Chapter Seven

Richard watched Trenwith through narrowed eyes praying that he was mistaken in his judgement but fearing the worst. Had the entire story been a fabrication? The man had seemed genuinely upset but maybe he was an expert at play-acting.

‘Well, I await your response. Why did you bring those ruffians to this house if you didn’t intend to harm the youngsters?’

‘I wished to be sure that they agreed to accompany me. My nephews are all but full-grown and could refuse to come. My men are here to ensure my wards do as they’re told.’ There was an edge to his voice, a hardness in his expression that belied his attempt to appear a benign old man seeking to put right an ancient wrong.

‘What are your plans for them?’

‘Demelza will be my hostess until I find her a suitable husband. I’ve got one or two gentlemen in mind and by next year, when the period of mourning is over, she will have a choice to make. Johnny must learn how to run my estates, learn to be a gentleman and a suitable heir to my title and property. Silas will train to be a vicar. I’ve got the perfect curacy for him when he’s qualified.’

‘If Johnny is to inherit your estate then Silas will have this. Therefore, there’s no need for him to be forced into the church. Demelza will never agree to marry a gentleman she has not chosen for herself.’

‘They will do as they’re told or suffer the consequences.’

Now Richard had the truth of the matter. This was no weak old

man but a tyrant come to wreak revenge on the innocent offspring of the woman who'd rejected him and the brother who'd taken away his bride.

Now was not the time to reveal that he had no intention of allowing this man to take the boys or Demelza. However powerful Trenwith might believe himself to be, Adam was not only the Earl of Somiton, but also an immensely wealthy man.

'There's nothing I can do to persuade you to reconsider? Johnny wished to purchase his colours and Silas has no interest whatsoever in the church.'

Sir Hugo sprung from his chair with the athleticism of a much younger man. He poked Richard hard in the chest and it took all his iron control not to floor him for his impertinence.

'I take back my demand that you marry my niece ... my natural daughter I should say ... She might be soiled goods but so was her mother. She is young and beautiful and I'm sure that I can sell her to the highest bidder.'

This was too much and Richard's clenched fist moved of its own volition. It landed with a satisfying crunch on the bastard's nose. Blood spurted and the man clutched his face and staggered back into the chair he'd just vacated.

'Here, stem the flow of gore with this. If you ever speak in that way about Miss Trenwith it'll not be your nose that I break but your neck.' Hardly a sensible thing to say but he was so angered he'd lost all sense of reason.

Trenwith stared at him with such venom, such hate, he knew he'd made an implacable enemy. He sent a quick prayer to the Almighty that he and his brother could somehow circumnavigate the law and keep Demelza and her brothers from this villain's clutches. The fact that he too could be in trouble, possibly arrested for his violence, didn't bother him at all.

Manson was standing outside the door ready to be called if necessary. 'What of his men? Are they badly injured?'

'No, sir, they'll live. Ed tossed them in a pile of old sacks to keep them warm so they'll not freeze to death tonight.'

‘I punched Trenwith and broke his nose. Could you attend to him? I’ve made things so much worse by doing so but I lost my temper when he...’ He stopped. There was no need for him to discuss what had happened with his valet – he’d no intention of repeating what had been said about Demelza unless forced to do so by a magistrate.

‘Understood, sir, I’ll take care of it. I’ll escort him to his bedchamber. Shall I get one of the men to fetch the doctor?’

‘I suppose you’d better. Trenwith will have to go in the bedroom vacated by Mrs Trenwith. There are no others unless I double up with you.’ His valet looked so startled at the suggestion that Richard smiled. ‘I’ll speak to the housekeeper. One of the new girls can get things ready for him. He might as well stay where he is until the doctor’s seen him.’

Dolly seemed unbothered by the fuss all the unwanted visitors had caused. ‘I’ve already sent out a nice dish of stew to the men in the outhouse. They might be bullies but I’ll not let them starve. The fire will be lit in that bedchamber immediately, sir, so Sir Hugo will be nice and comfortable when he goes up.’

Doctor Henwood made no comment about the injury. It was obvious the patient had been punched and the fact that Richard’s hand was bruised made him the culprit. Manson offered to act as Trenwith’s valet for the night.

‘Yes, I’d be grateful if you’d do that for me. I don’t want any of those incarcerated in the outhouse wandering about the place unsupervised. None of them are indoor servants whatever Trenwith might be saying.’

‘I fetched in his luggage earlier.’

‘I’m going to ride along the cliffs – the sea breeze will clear my head. I need to come up with a solution to this conundrum and at the moment I can’t see what that might be.’

On his return he still had only the one solution and that would be impossible given the circumstances. If he and Demelza were married then he thought he would have a strong case for becoming the boys’ legal guardian instead of the uncle. However, she was underage and Trenwith certainly wasn’t going to give his consent.



Perhaps they could elope but that would then weaken his case for assuming responsibility for the boys. If he had been an earl then he was certain he could persuade any magistrate to find in his favour. He doubted that Sir Hugo was popular even in his own demesne as he probably treated his staff and neighbours with the same callous disregard as he'd treated this household.

He could hear the captives banging about in the outhouse and he didn't blame them for protesting at this rough treatment. They'd been doing their duty and had been poorly used for doing so.

'Ed, Joe, I don't think we can keep them incarcerated any longer. They're not coming into the house so is there somewhere warmer and more pleasant than their present whereabouts they could go?'

The men shook their heads. 'They'll kick up a fuss, sir, and break in if needs be. They've got a dozen sacks and three horse blankets. They'll come to no harm where they are.'

'Very well, I'll take your advice and leave them until tomorrow. Do they have food and water?'

'They've got a brazier, enough fuel for the night and the makings for tea. We also threw in a bag of decent bread, sausage and cheese. They'll not go hungry.'

'Excellent. They need nothing else. I'll release them tomorrow morning.'

He ate a solitary dinner in the family room and he thought that Manson had the better deal being in the kitchen with the other staff. He retired early still not certain how he was going to stop Trenwith from forcing Demelza and her brothers to go with him.

The staff, Manson and himself could prevent this for a few days but once the authorities were involved there'd be no alternative but to let the law take over. The very thought that Demelza might be harmed, the boys forced down a path that they disliked, filled him with anxiety. He'd drunk far more than was good for him and despite his unease he fell asleep as soon as he clambered into bed.

\*

Demelza's plans worked out far better than she'd expected. The trunks were carried silently downstairs by herself, Jenny and Dawkins.

Her brothers had already gone out to take the horses to the village. She imagined it had taken them some time to tie rags around the animals' hooves to ensure there was no telltale clatter on the cobbles. It was fortunate indeed that the moon was full, there was no wind or rain, and despite being cold the temperature wasn't below freezing.

Her main worry had been that those men locked into the outhouse would awake and raise the alarm but they remained quiet. The new carriage had been pulled out manually and then the team, hooves muffled with cloth, had been led out and quickly harnessed. The trunks were already strapped to the top and a miscellany of boxes and bags were piled inside.

She and Jenny scrambled in and sat together. Immediately they covered their legs with blankets and they were hardly settled when Dawkins snapped his whip and the horses moved forward. There were no lanterns lit in the carriage, although they were there ready to be used if necessary.

'Oh my, miss, I hope that lot don't fall on our feet if we hit a pothole.' Jenny's voice sounded loud in the darkness of the interior.

'I think we have more important things to concern ourselves with. I'm prepared to suffer crushed toes if it means we can make a clean escape.'

They'd been travelling for about half an hour when her brothers arrived at the side of the carriage. One of them tapped on the roof and quickly she leaned over and lowered the window in the door.

'All done, Demelza. Old Jim's happy to take care of them until tomorrow. I gave him five shillings and he was more than happy with that. The horses will be brought back and turned loose in the back paddock. This means we have more than a day's start. I'm keeping the coverings on the horses' hooves as it means we're unlikely to be heard when we pass through any villages,' Johnny said.

'Splendid, I'm beginning to think that this scheme will work. We just need to get out of Cornwall safely and can then consider our options.'

Silas moved his gelding alongside and poked his head through the window. 'We've got another four hours of darkness and we should be

approaching Plymouth by then. The town's big enough for us to find somewhere quiet to stop. The horses will need to rest for a couple of hours.'

'Don't forget to remove the rags from the horses' hooves before it gets light.' Her brother nodded and Demelza pulled up the window.

They trundled through Bodmin and Liskeard without meeting any other vehicles travelling in either direction. The roads were muddy and they didn't make the progress they'd hoped.

The carriage rocked to a halt. She opened the door and jumped down – she was wearing the garments she rode astride in. This meant she had boy's breeches on under a heavy, divided skirt. She was certain that no one would be aware she wasn't wearing a regular gown. The heavy weight of the gold coins, hidden in two specially constructed pockets, knocked against her knees as she descended.

Her boots squelched in the mud. 'I'll do one of the team – we don't want to be seen doing this as it will draw attention to us.'

Dawn had crept over the horizon and soon there would be people about their business and it was imperative that their passage through wherever it was wouldn't be noted as different from any other vehicle.

'We'll go faster now but we're not going to get to Plymouth before we have to stop. Do you want me to ride ahead and find a suitable place?' Johnny appeared to be enjoying this adventure – but then he was a young man and didn't worry about things as she did.

She wiped her muddy hands on a cloth and nodded. 'Yes, do that. On consideration I think it would be better if we travelled when there were others about as then we'll be less noticeable.'

An hour later the carriage turned from the main route and continued for half a mile before turning sharply into the cobbled yard of a substantial inn.

Jenny checked that her appearance was as it should be, her bonnet not askew, and no mud on her boots or skirt.

'There, miss, you look just fine. I'm that desperate to relieve myself...' The girl stopped and clapped her hands over her mouth as if she could push the words back.

Demelza laughed. 'As am I. I'm sure my brother will have

arranged something. I'm also more than ready to break my fast.'

The five of them ate in the chamber that had been set aside for their use. Dawkins and her brothers used the primitive facilities outside but she and Jenny had the luxury of a commode behind a screen.

'We're about three miles from Plymouth and should pass through just as the early morning traffic starts,' Johnny said as he munched through his fifth piece of toast.

'I've been trying to second guess where our uncle might think we would go. Do you recall that Mama once said she'd spent a summer at Bude when she was a child? Why don't we head there?'

'That sounds as good as anywhere else, Demelza. It also means we don't actually have to go right through Plymouth and are already on the correct road. This leads to Saltash and from there we go through Cullington and then should make Launceston by lunchtime.'

'How far will it be then to Bude?'

'I'm not exactly sure. Dawkins, do you know?'

'I do that, young master. I reckon it's no more than twenty miles. If you reserve chambers somewhere in Launceston then we can complete the journey easily tomorrow.'

'That's very good news. Do you think that will be far enough away to avoid being found for the next few years?'

Silas answered. 'We've been talking about that whilst we were riding here. We think you should remain out of mourning and dress as you are today. We also think we should change our names and add a few years to our age.'

'Johnny, you could pass for one and twenty as you already need to shave daily. We must come up with a name that has no connection to the family. What about Venning? It's a good Cornish name,' she suggested.

'I think you should be Mrs Venning, your husband away at sea, and we will be the brothers Yellend.'

'Then that's agreed. Launceston is a bigger place than Bude, I believe. Whilst the horses are resting I'll go in search of a property we

can lease,' Johnny said.

'It needs to be furnished but no staff. We can employ anyone we need once we're settled. I've been worrying what might happen to Dolly and the others now we're gone. That vile man will have control of the house and might well dismiss all of them without reference.'

'Richard will see that they're provided for. One thing I'm quite sure of, he'll be relieved that we've taken matters into our own hands. You do realise the only other option would have been for you and he to marry and for him to become our guardian?'

Johnny was right – she'd thought about that and knew Richard would have willingly sacrificed his freedom for the three of them. This was the main reason she'd settled on this alternative. He was a good man and she wished she'd met him under different circumstances. She hoped remaining in Cornwall, even so far from Seaview, would be sufficient to keep them safe from their nasty relative.

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Richard was up early and knocked quietly on Demelza's door. He'd decided to ask her to marry him and despite the circumstances, was actually looking forward to having her as his wife. As he'd thoroughly compromised her by being in her bedchamber then he thought he could obtain a special licence on those grounds whatever Trenwith said. He'd certainly never met another young lady he'd liked as much and must suppose that a marriage could prosper without there being love on either side.

He waited and after having no response pushed open the door. One look told him all he needed to know. He moved swiftly to the boys' room and was unsurprised when he got no answer. This too was empty. Sometime during the night the three of them had run away.

Was he relieved or disappointed? A bit of both – if he was honest. By removing themselves from the clutches of their uncle they'd solved the problem. However, he thought it highly unlikely they would manage to remain incognito for the four years necessary for Johnny to achieve his majority.

There was no need to tell Trenwith. The longer the youngsters had to make their escape the better it would be. God knows where they

would go – but at least they had a decent amount of money to get them started.

Once the dust had settled he would send someone in search of them and, once found, would ensure that they had a good income. It was the least he could do. This house effectively belonged to Sir Hugo now and he doubted the man would keep on the staff. That too he would take care of – make sure they all had excellent references and a goodly sum to tide them over until they found further employment.

Manson was drinking tea at the table in the kitchen and greeted him with a smile. ‘They’ve gone, sir, and not just that. They’ve taken all the horses and removed the wheels from the cart and the carriage. Nobody will be going after them today, that’s for sure.’

He pulled the door closed behind him not wishing to be overheard. Voices carried up the stairwell and Trenwith might well be getting up himself.

‘It’s what I’d have done myself. Sir Hugo will be furious. I think it likely we’ll all be evicted. We can’t keep his minions locked up any longer and I’ve no wish to become involved in further violence. He might well have a case against me already for breaking his nose. I don’t wish to exacerbate matters.’

The housekeeper came in and on seeing him she too smiled happily. ‘Good for them, they’ll do well on their own, don’t you fret, sir.’

‘I’m more concerned about your welfare, and that of the other staff. Sir Hugo will dismiss you all. I’ll supply you with references and funds but I suggest you get prepared and collect your belongings together as once those men are free you won’t have the opportunity to do so.’

She nodded. ‘We’re all ready to leave. Our bundles are hidden outside in the yard. I reckon Ed and Joe will have to stay on to look after the livestock and run the farm, for the moment anyway.’

‘Manson, would you do the same for us so we too are ready to depart when necessary? We’ll walk to the village – it’s no more than two miles and all downhill.’

‘You’ll be able to find rooms at The Jolly Sailor, sir, until your

horses are found.'

'Do you have somewhere to go, Dolly?'

'I do, thank you for asking. I've family in the village and so have the other girls.'

Manson drained his tea and stood up. 'I'll fetch a supply of paper, pens, and ink, shall I, sir?'

'Yes, do that. I'll write the necessary references when we're established at our new address. I'm hoping the horses won't be found at least until tomorrow.'

'Ed and Joe are certain of it.'

He was almost knocked from his chair by the arrival of Billy, the huge lurcher. The dog tried to scramble onto his lap and he pushed him down. 'Why didn't you go with them, old boy? They must have forgotten you. You stay with me now – I'll reunite you with your family, I give you my word on that.'

## Chapter Eight

Demelza was impressed at the accommodation her brothers found for them in Launceston. The inn, although not big, was immaculate and the bedchamber was more than adequate for their needs. She rather thought the fact that they travelled with their own valet and maid added to their prestige.

‘It’s too late for you to go searching for somewhere for us to live tonight, Johnny, but hopefully you’ll find somewhere tomorrow. I’m happy to stay here an extra night if necessary. The food’s excellent and no one has shown the slightest interest in us.’

‘It will do the horses no harm to rest at least until the afternoon,’ Johnny said.

‘Is it actually possible to lease a house and move into it on the same day? Surely there are legal requirements and other things that must be completed.’

‘I remember Pa saying that a neighbour was able to lease a house immediately when his own was burned to the ground. I’m hoping it will be the case for us. We have the gold and look perfectly respectable.’

They were discussing their plans in a small, private parlour downstairs. Dawkins and Jenny were eating elsewhere.

‘We haven’t yet discussed exactly why we’ve moved to Bude so suddenly,’ she said as she was about to fork another mouthful of the delicious pastry into her mouth.

‘My brother and I are on a repairing lease and you have agreed to act as housekeeper until our pockets are refilled,’ Johnny suggested.



‘I hardly think that anyone would go as far as Bude if they normally frequented the clubs in London.’

‘We have very pressing debts and those that we owe money to would search at once at our family estate in Hertfordshire – hence the need to live somewhere hundreds of miles from where we would be expected to be.’

She chewed thoughtfully on her dessert before replying. ‘If that’s the case then we would hardly remain here more than a year.’

‘Good heavens, Demelza, if we’re still out of that man’s clutches after a year I think we’d be safe to go home, don’t you?’ Silas said laughing merrily.

Then her appetite deserted her and she dropped her fork with a clatter. ‘We forgot Billy. How could we ride off and abandon our precious dog? He was the last link to Pa.’

Her brothers were as dismayed as she at this omission from their party. ‘I don’t understand why he didn’t follow us? Silas and I would have then seen him.’

‘I know why – he was in the boot room and has been trained from a pup not to make a sound when in the house as otherwise he would have been put out.’

‘He will transfer his allegiance to Richard, there’s no danger that man will have control of him. Don’t look so distressed, sister, we’ll be together again one day,’ Johnny said.

They continued with their meal but she pushed her plate aside. Now was not the time to remind them that they no longer had ownership of Seaview and by returning there would immediately reveal their whereabouts.

Demelza looked around her new abode with approval. ‘I can hardly credit that you were able to find something so perfect for us so quickly. We only left Seaview four days ago and yet here we are comfortably established at Frankston Manor.’

‘It’s half the size of Seaview but quite big enough for our needs,’ Silas said as he stretched out his booted legs to the roaring fire in the spacious sitting room.

‘We each have our own bedchamber, there’s one spare in case we have visitors – which I sincerely hope we don’t. Both Jenny and Dawkins have their own rooms in the attic and there’s ample space for the extra staff that we need.’

‘We need a cook and two maids for inside. Johnny, you’ve explored the exterior and grounds – do we need to employ anyone full-time to take care of those?’

‘I think there must be journeymen already coming in. The chickens, ducks and geese have been fed regularly. Silas and I can manage the horses, we don’t need to employ a groom. There are only five acres, not including the two paddocks for the horses, of course.’

‘The furniture is somewhat old-fashioned, but sturdy and well-maintained and will do us very well. Dawkins and Jenny are managing to cook for us all, but we need a permanent solution. Also, there’s the heavy work to do and the general cleaning.’

‘When the two of them went down to the town they put the word out that we were requiring a cook and two maids. It’s a thriving port used by dozens of smaller vessels that are similar to those where we used to live.’

‘That’s excellent news, Johnny, as it would make my decision to live here seem more sensible. A sailor’s wife would obviously wish to be close to the sea.’

She gazed around the main reception room of their new home. She was sitting on the large padded settle; her brothers had adopted one of the two matching armchairs as their own. There was a walnut bureau against the wall, a small desk and matching chair and that was it. There were no pictures on the walls and the previous occupiers had left nothing personal behind.

‘I brought my paints and brushes and intend to spend my time capturing the landscape here and then my efforts can be framed and put on the walls to make this place more our own.’

‘There’s plenty of game in the woods so we shall make it our business to provide meat for the table. There’s a farm a mile away where we can get the milk, cheese and butter that we need.’

She smiled at Silas. Two weeks ago he wouldn’t have considered

doing anything useful and here he was talking about dairy products.

‘This place is considerably warmer than Seaview. I must own that I much prefer to live in a smaller establishment – so much easier and less expensive to maintain a reasonable standard of living.’

‘We have this room, dining room, a study and the servants’ rooms as well. What more do we want to be comfortable?’ Johnny leaned down and tossed a couple of logs onto the fire although it needed none.

‘If I ever marry it won’t be to a gentleman who lives in a vast house with dozens of bedchambers and reception rooms and needs an army of staff to run it.’

Her brothers looked at her. ‘Then you’ll be looking for a vicar or a lawyer not an aristocrat or a wealthy man,’ Johnny said with a grin.

‘I’m not looking for anyone. Remember, I’m a happily married woman. Until you reach your majority, I must maintain my masquerade.’

‘You will be one and twenty in two years’ time so you could marry without revealing our whereabouts. Just say that your imaginary husband has perished at sea like Pa did.’

Suddenly a wave of grief almost overwhelmed her. How could they be joking and laughing together when their beloved mother had only been in the ground a short while?

She blinked away the moisture and schooled her features to disguise her sadness. ‘It will be the festive season in less than two weeks. Although none of us feel like celebrating it will seem odd to our neighbours and whoever we employ if we don’t at least recognise the Lord’s birthday in some way.’

‘We can attend the local church on Sunday and do so again on Christmas Day. As long as we have a celebration meal that day then that should suffice,’ Johnny said.

‘Mama always so enjoyed decorating the house in the old-fashioned way with greenery and candles and a huge yule log in the fireplace in the hall. If you could find something suitable in our woods then would you cut it for me? I shall do some small arrangements in honour of her.’

Richard went for a brisk walk along the cliff top accompanied by the dog. On his return he could hear Sir Hugo shouting. He increased his pace and burst in through the back door.

‘You stupid woman – why didn’t you wake me as soon as you discovered my niece and nephews had fled the house?’ The man’s nose had been reset and apart from two magnificent black eyes he looked relatively unscathed.

‘You would be better directing your anger to me, sir. I told Dolly not to disturb you. It matters not how long they’ve been gone as we can’t go after them as our horses have also vanished.’

This was obviously news to Sir Hugo. ‘Whoever stole them will hang as a horse thief.’

‘As it was obviously your family who took them in order to slow your pursuit, do you intend to condemn them to the gallows?’

The man muttered and huffed but said nothing sensible.

‘Coffee in the drawing room when you have a moment, Dolly, if you please.’ Richard hoped by his casual attitude to postpone the inevitable for as long as possible. This optimism was short-lived as the three men who’d been locked in the outhouse all night stormed into the kitchen.

Having his bully boys at his side once more gave Sir Hugo confidence. ‘This is now my house. You will leave immediately or I’ll have you thrown out neck and crop.’ He pointed at the housekeeper. ‘You and the maids can clear off as well. I’ll not have you under my roof a moment longer.’

Richard smiled politely and strolled out followed by the dog who was growling, but remained at his side when he put his hand on his head. Dolly and the three maids already had their cloaks and clogs on and they walked out smiling to each other rather enjoying the moment.

He got a warm reception at The Jolly Sailor and was soon comfortably ensconced in the snug with a group of local fishermen who are waiting for the tide to turn so they could take their boats out.

He was sure they also had another trade – but nothing of that illegal activity was mentioned. He retreated to his chamber fearful he would become inebriated if he remained there any longer. The local cider was very potent.

After an afternoon spent writing six glowing references and another letter to Adam, he wandered downstairs to enjoy a convivial evening and an excellent dinner. As promised his hired hack had mysteriously appeared in the stables the following morning and shortly afterwards Ed arrived driving the cart.

‘Are all the horses back?’

‘Not Sir Hugo’s. It’s right odd but them carriage wheels are proving difficult to put back on. I reckon they’ll not be able to leave today.’

‘Well done. Here, something for your troubles and also a reference for when you need to find further work. Has he said if he intends to lease the property?’

‘He has said me and Joe can continue to work here as can the two new men until things are arranged. I reckon he’s already got someone he’ll send down to take over the estate.’

Richard watched the man walk away both well-pleased with the meeting. Manson was already loading the luggage into the cart.

‘Can Sir Hugo take the youngsters money as well as their home, sir?’

‘He won’t be able to access the funds in the bank. I’ve already written a letter freezing the account. Unfortunately, Demelza and her brothers won’t be able to touch it either and I’d be more sanguine if I knew they had sufficient to live on for the next few years.’

‘We’ll be ready to leave in half an hour. If we make reasonable time to Bodmin we can catch the afternoon stage. What are we going to do with Billy?’

‘He can travel under our feet – I’ll pay full fare for him. After the festive season, and before Adam and I are obliged to go to London to escort the girls for the coming Season, I’m going to look for them. I think if we get within a few miles of their whereabouts then Billy will find them for me.’

‘Why don’t I start the search immediately, Mr Somiton? If you leave it until next year folk will have forgotten what they saw. I’ll not bother the youngsters – just make sure they’re safe – and then return with the information.’

‘I would be grateful if you’d do that for me. It means you’ll likely be stranded somewhere as nothing moves on the Lord’s birthday and often for several days after that. When I call in at the bank, I’ll also make sure you have sufficient for your needs.’

‘What if I take that grand animal with me? Do you reckon he’ll come?’

‘I’m sure he will. He’s an intelligent dog and will know that we’re searching for his owners. Buy the horse I was riding – it’s a good mount and you’ll need to be able to travel freely about the countryside.’

Whilst he went to speak to the bank manager he realised much had happened since he’d last spoken to the man. He’d yet to discover who had purloined the money in the first place but somehow that now seemed unimportant in view of what had transpired.

Penrith was only too happy to accommodate his wishes once he realised the investigation was to be abandoned.

‘The culprit has been dealt with; I give you my word on that. I can certainly give you the bank draft made payable to the bearer when presented at any reputable bank. I also have here a purse with the twenty guineas for your man to accomplish his search.

‘If the Trenwith family eventually return to Seaview you can be assured that they will have everything they wish regardless of who is head of the family.’

‘You understand that in the circumstances it’s unlikely they can come back. Keep the money safe for them, make sure it’s well invested, and when young Johnny Trenwith reaches his majority, I’m sure he’ll be back to claim it.’

He shook hands and walked out with the items he needed. The bank draft for a thousand pounds was against his own account and no doubt Adam would be shocked at his generosity. If he hadn’t written

to Sir Hugo then Demelza and her brothers could have remained where they were and not have been forced to uproot themselves in this fashion.

Manson was waiting outside, the handsome gelding's reins looped over his arm and the lurcher sitting by his feet.

'Here, hide this somewhere. Do you have your weapon with you?'

'I do, sir, primed and loaded and hidden in the pocket of my riding coat. I'll not let you down – I'll send word by express of my progress.'

They shook hands. His ex-valet rode away and the dog loped after him. Richard trusted this man implicitly. He could vanish with the bearer bond if he wished to do so and there would be nothing anyone could do about it. When Manson returned, he would be promoted to a more senior position and he would start looking for a replacement valet immediately.

The mail coach arrived a few minutes later. This wasn't a place where the passengers alighted to refresh and relieve themselves so he only had a few minutes to jump in and store his bag beneath his feet.

He'd expected to be jammed against other passengers but he and a stout matron holding a large basket on her lap were the only occupants. He took the window seat diagonally opposite to her, nodded politely, stretched out his legs, drew his coat around him and closed his eyes.

In his opinion it was always better to feign sleep than be obliged to hold a conversation with strangers with whom one had nothing in common. He travelled frequently to London on business and usually took the stage coach as it was less trouble, and more comfortable, than riding or using his own carriage.

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Demelza was pleased with the appearance of the house. Her brothers had done well to find so much greenery and one of the new maids had willingly scrambled about in the attics and found a trunk of ribbons and other bits and bobs.

There'd been no need to go in search of journeymen to take care of the grounds, tend to the kitchen garden, and the poultry ducks and geese that roamed freely in the paddocks at the rear of the building.

The two men who'd been working there for years arrived under their own volition and were now employed to come in two days a week to cut firewood, clean out the barn where the birds lived, and take care of any other outside jobs that needed doing.

On Christmas Eve she was sitting around the dining table with her brothers well-satisfied with her supper. The new cook had proved excellent and the two girls who helped her run the house were also industrious and pleasant.

‘Johnny, I thought we attracted far too much attention when we went to church last week. Did you notice those in the front pew staring at us?’

‘That was Sir John Arundel and his family. They’re the wealthiest family around here and own most of the land that surrounds us. Although Frankston Manor is not a grand property, it’s the second largest in the vicinity. I wonder if it’s where our mother came for her summer visit?’

‘For heaven’s sake, don’t enquire about that as it will immediately draw suspicion to us.’

He grinned. ‘I’m not a nodkin, sister, there’s no need to state the obvious. Remember, I’m now head of this household and two years your senior.’

‘You are no such thing. I am a respectable married woman of three and twenty and therefore your superior in every way.’

The light-hearted argument continued and the three of them removed themselves to the sitting room to continue the conversation. She was delighted that her brothers were taking their new responsibilities seriously and no longer cavilled at the extra work they had, or insisted on going down to the town to mingle with the locals at the port.

‘To return to our earlier conversation about being the subject of scrutiny in church – I’m not comfortable with being obliged to lie to someone’s face about who we are. It’s all very well dissembling to the staff but quite another thing to do it to our neighbours.’

‘Are you suggesting that we shouldn’t attend the matins on Christmas Day? Surely that will draw even more attention to us?’



Johnny said.

‘As there are only two rows of seats and we have one of them, it’s inevitable that we’ll be obliged to speak to the Arundels.’

‘They won’t want to speak to Silas and me. What if we go tomorrow and say that you have a megrim if asked?’

‘Yes, that would be better. I believe that if we can get to the new year without being discovered then we’re safe from Sir Hugo.’

‘We’ve been here almost two weeks, Demelza, more than enough time for him to find us if he was going to,’ Silas said.

‘I agree, I think we’re safe already. Remember that I set up a bank account in Launceston as well as signing papers at the lawyers’ offices. Both those things were risky but nothing untoward has taken place since we arrived.’

‘Johnny, the other thing that’s of concern to me is the expense of everything. Despite the fact that this is a smaller establishment it’s taking far more to run it than I’d anticipated.’

‘Then it’s fortunate you don’t have to settle your accounts every week. We have more than enough to live as we are for a year. Before then I’ll sell the jewellery and that will give us another year.’

Silas sighed loudly. ‘Having to pay for the lease in advance made a huge dent in our finances. However, at least we know we can’t be evicted for three years even if we do go hungry.’

## Chapter Nine

Richard didn't travel directly to Somiton but called in at the London office and stayed in the convenient apartment close to the docks that he and Adam had used for years. It was one of three in this substantial house and serviced by a competent concierge and her staff. The journey had been tedious in the extreme and taken him three days to accomplish.

'My word, Mr Somiton, it's a good thing you keep fresh garments here. Give me your bag and I'll get everything laundered and back to you by morning,' Mrs Bevan said as he collected the key.

'I only intended to be away a short time. I'll dine at my club and then have matters to attend to and will travel home tomorrow afternoon. I wish to be at home to celebrate the Lord's birthday.'

'Tomorrow's Christmas Eve and will be the last day you can travel. Is Mr Manson with you?'

'Obviously not. He's on business for me. Send up your son to take care of me, if you would.'

A full two hours later he was freshly garbed, shaved and bathed had hailed a jarvey to convey him to White's. He handed his greatcoat, gloves, hat and cane to the waiting flunky and walked straight into the dining room.

He always wore a beaver and carried a sword stick disguised as a cane when walking the streets of London at night but not at any other time. Any gentleman abroad in the darkness was vulnerable to attack by footpads even in the more salubrious areas.

As expected, he was greeted warmly by his friends and settled

down to a pleasant evening and an excellent dinner. Lord Renshaw waylaid Richard as he was collecting his outdoor garments.

‘I know that you and the earl are searching for the villains that tried to burn you in your beds a few months ago. I have reliable information that those you seek are residing in a remote farmhouse near Norwich.’

‘God’s teeth! How did you come by that news?’

‘Suffice it to say that I had business of a personal nature in that vicinity and heard about this trio having taken a short lease on the property. On further enquiry the descriptions fitted exactly those of the missing men and the woman. Here, I have the address written on this paper.’

Richard shook the man’s hand with enthusiasm after taking the proffered information. ‘I cannot thank you enough, my lord. We’ll send men to investigate after the festive celebrations are done. Do I have your address?’

The doorman was sent to fetch pen and paper and this too was written down and handed to him. Adam would wish to thank the man personally and also add him and his family to the guest list for the three grand balls that would be held next spring.

He strode off, ever vigilant, swinging his cane and keeping away from any dark alleys he might pass. He hailed a passing jarvey and was soon safely restored to his accommodation. Renshaw was a man about his age, his height, but of slimmer build. His non-descript mouse-brown hair did nothing to detract from his regular features and dark green eyes.

He recalled that the man had been jilted at the altar and had since forsworn the marriage mart. He held a handsome estate in Hertfordshire somewhere near St Albans and, although not as wealthy as the Somiton family he was in a position to comfortably support a wife and family if he so wished. With five cousins to bring out he rather thought Renshaw might do very well for one of them.

Leo Somiton, who had recently resigned his commission and was now working for Adam in some capacity or other, would be the ideal man to send in search of Somiton, his son and Mrs Somiton – the

errant mother of Eloise and Amelia. Jessica, the youngest of the five girls, was the abandoned daughter of Somiton. The girls were doing splendidly under the auspices of Leo's mother and the companion Adam had employed and were much better off away from their pernicious parents.

The next day he visited his bank and warned them that there would be a demand for a thousand pounds coming shortly from Cornwall. Then he spent a couple of hours talking to the clerks and senior secretary who worked in the office on the docks coordinating the coming and going of their large fleet.

The business was booming – they'd been fortunate and in the seven years since he and Adam had purchased their first ship had never lost one until Captain Trenwith and his crew had sunk in the Indian Ocean over a year ago.

He wasn't looking forward to being confined to yet another stale-smelling stage coach but had no intention of wasting money on a post-chaise. There was always a gig and driver available for hire at the posting inn no matter what the hour.

This meant he arrived at Somiton Hall at ten o'clock, just two hours before Christmas Day. By some mysterious osmosis, despite the late hour, the door was opened as he approached and he was bowed in with a smile and his bag, and other belongings, were immediately taken from him.

'Arrange for somebody to be my temporary valet. Manson's away on business for me.'

'Yes, sir, I'll send someone suitable to your apartment immediately. The family are in the drawing room – do you wish for a supper tray to be brought to you there?' The butler, Foster, said politely. 'The tea and pastries are about to be taken in.'

'That would be splendid, I've not eaten since this morning. Coffee, a large jug, as well, if you please.'

The sound of laughter filled the vast entrance hall and he smiled; he was glad to be home amongst his family. There was a massive yule log burning merrily in the fireplace, everywhere he looked was decorated with garlands of greenery, fat, golden beeswax candles

pushed amongst it and ribbons and bows galore.

This house was a monstrosity but he was forced to admit that decked out in its festive glory it looked almost welcoming. The smell of the pine branches was a great improvement on the damp coldness that usually greeted one on stepping through the front door.

Adam, being his twin, somehow sensed Richard was home. 'I was beginning to fear you wouldn't make it for Christmas. Welcome back, we've much to talk about but business can wait until the morning. Everyone is here – including Edward and Eleanor.'

They embraced and walked in together knowing only the fact that he was wearing day clothes and everyone else was in evening rig distinguished him from his brother.

After greeting everyone enthusiastically he found himself a comfortable seat next to a table upon which his supper could be placed when it arrived.

Adam joined him. 'Marriage certainly suits Edward and Eleanor, don't you think? Seeing them so happy makes me wonder if it's not time that we stepped into parson's mousetrap too.'

'I noticed that Jessica and Leo seem close – is there something between them?'

'I wouldn't be surprised and would have no objection if there was. Eleanor's increasing, by the way, which might also account for her radiance,' his brother said with a smile.

'The countess is now a bosom bow of Estelle. We've dispensed with formality – there are too many Miss Somitons, Mrs Somitons and Mr Somitons in this family now. To distinguish us from those villains who have so far escaped my search it's far easier to address everyone by their first name.'

Richard grinned and nodded at the Countess of Somiton, now mother-in-law to their good friend and business partner, Edward Revere. 'Are you addressing that formidable lady as Charlotte?'

'I know, quite extraordinary, but the girls refer to her as Aunt Charlotte, Leo refers to her as Cousin Charlotte, Edward calls her Mama but Estelle, you and I are privileged to address her as Charlotte.'

The tea and cakes as well as his food and coffee arrived, therefore conversation was forgotten.

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Demelza was relieved when her brothers got back from church. 'Did anyone comment on my absence? Did anyone ask questions?'

'No and no,' Silas said as he gave her a brotherly hug. 'It was perishing in the church and we were all too busy trying not to freeze to death to worry about anything else. Thankfully, the vicar kept his sermon down to a few sentences.'

'There were flurries of snow as we walked back, I think we're likely to get another blizzard tonight. I can't recall such a hard winter before,' Johnny said as he flicked back his coat-tails to warm his derrière at the roaring fire in the sitting room.

'Under normal circumstances I'd be dreading the arrival of such weather but the worse it is the less chance there is of anyone finding us. That's if Sir Hugo's actually looking for us. I wish we knew what was happening.'

'Never mind all that, when do we eat? Are we going to have our festive feast at three o'clock as you promised? If not, then I'm going to the kitchen to find something to stave off my hunger pangs.' Silas was halfway to the exit when there was a thunderous knocking on the front door.

He froze. She was on her feet without knowing she'd stood up and the three of them huddled together too shocked to speak.

One of the maids answered the summons and suddenly Billy hurtled through the door, mud-spattered and smelly, but ecstatic to be reunited with them. They were on the floor hugging and exclaiming over him when there was the sound of masculine footsteps approaching. Manson stepped in beaming.

'I beg your pardon for arriving on Christmas Day, but your dog was determined to find you regardless of the weather and the date.'

As one the three of them rushed forward and embraced the familiar figure despite the fact that he was still in his greatcoat, muffler and gloves. Who was the more surprised at their actions it would be hard to tell. None of them was given to exchanging

embraces with the staff.

Silas stepped away. 'I'll take care of your horse. I assume that you rode here?'

'I did indeed, Master Silas. There's no need to bother yourself, I'll do it now. I just wished to let you know I was here.'

'You stay where you are, Manson. My brother and I are the grooms here and you are our guest.'

Johnny assisted the unexpected visitor with his greatcoat and other paraphernalia and then handed it to a maid who was hovering nervously in the door. He snapped his fingers and called the dog who really needed to be cleaned up before he settled in. Billy ignored him and flopped down in front of the fire, wagged his tail, sighed and promptly fell asleep.

'Have the spare bedchamber prepared. Get a fire lit in there and run a warming pan through the sheets to air them,' she told the girl.

Manson excused himself and she heard him thumping up the stairs. He would need to spruce himself up a little as he was sadly mired with mud and other detritus from his travels. Johnny hurried out to join his brother so the horse could be taken care of all the sooner.

The visitor returned a few minutes after her brothers who had also been obliged to wipe their boots free of mud and wash their hands to remove the smell of the stable. Without being requested a tray of hastily made sandwiches, plum cake and spiced wine appeared. Perfect – exactly what was needed on Christmas Day. The smell of food roused the sleeping dog and he wolfed down everything he was given before returning to his slumber.

Belatedly they wished each other a merry Christmas and then Manson explained how he managed to find them so easily whilst he devoured everything put in front of him as if he hadn't eaten for a sennight.

'There's no need to fret that you'll be discovered by your nasty relative. It took me several days to pick up your trail which then led me to Launceston. Billy there did the rest. Without the dog I'd not have found you in this backwater.'

‘Having our precious dog back is the best Christmas gift we could have had. Thank you so much for bringing him. The weather’s closing in so you might well be obliged to stay here for a while.’

‘Happy to do so, Miss Trenwith. I’m not expected back until the new year at the earliest. That there dog isn’t your only gift.’ He handed over a sealed document and she broke the wax and read it with growing incredulity. There was a banker’s draft, but she was more interested in the letter that accompanied it.

*My dear, Demelza, Johnny and Silas,  
I blame myself for you having to run away as you did and  
deeply  
regret the fact that I contacted your uncle without speaking to  
you first.  
I’m sending you sufficient to keep you going for another year or  
two  
but sincerely hope that won’t be necessary and that you can  
return  
home sooner.*

*Manson will remain with you if you wish him  
to. He is able to offer you any assistance that you  
might need as well as protection should that also be  
required. It will be at no expense to you.*

*Before you reject my man and send him away  
consider this. Having him able to speak to the bank,  
deal with any other matters, will make things so  
much easier for you.*

*If you require anything further from me do not  
hesitate to contact me directly or through My dear  
Demelza Manson. I’ll never forget my short stay at  
your house and offer again my apologies and  
condolences for your sad loss.*

She looked up to see both her brothers staring at her



desperate to know what she was reading. Before she answered she examined the other paper.

‘Mr Somiton has given us one thousand pounds. He has also given us Mr Manson if we wish to keep him.’

‘I say, that’s capital news. The extra funds obviously, but even more as us having Mr Manson here will make things so much easier,’ Johnny said and got up and thumped the unfortunate gentleman on the back making him splutter his wine over his breeches.

By the time he’d recovered the matter was settled. ‘What do we call you? If you’re to be a permanent member of this household, a member of our family, then we can hardly refer to you as we did before.’

‘My given name is Albert – perhaps you could call me Uncle Albert?’

‘That’s perfect and you must address us by our given names. Jenny and Dawkins won’t reveal our secret and your sudden appearance will then make sense to the other staff,’ she said.

The letter from Richard was perused several times and then Johnny discarded it on a side table. Uncle Albert had agreed to take the banker’s draft to the bank in Launceston when the festive period was over.

The Christmas meal was everything it should be and there was ample left for the staff to enjoy when they’d finished. They retired early. The new member of their household was exhausted after his efforts to find them and it seemed only polite for her brothers and herself to do the same.

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Despite the fact that it was Christmas Day the following morning found Richard closeted with his brother in the study whilst he told him exactly what had transpired over the past weeks. This was extraordinary enough without the added information that Somiton and his son were perhaps finally within reach of justice.

‘You did exactly as I’d have done in the circumstances, Richard. Let’s hope Manson finds them and keeps them safe. I’ll start investigating this Sir Hugo person and see if I can bring him to heel.

The fact that Johnny Trenwith is his heir somewhat complicates matters.

‘I’m sure in time I’ll find something with which to bring pressure upon him and have him pass over his guardianship to me. I assume that’s what you wish me to do?’

‘I’ve not considered that option and assumed that if anyone took them over it would be me. However, they’ll do far better with an earl than a commoner like me. I think we should send Leo and the trained men to Norfolk after Twelfth Night.’

‘I was about to suggest that very thing. Leo’s a soldier to his core. If your information’s correct, and you seem sure that it is, then we might have the villains in irons before long. I must own that until that happens I’ll not be completely relaxed about the girl now under my protection.’

‘Surely you don’t think that man would try to kidnap Jessica? What possible advantage could that do him? His assets have been frozen...’ Richard stopped mid-sentence as he realised the significance. ‘Jessica’s a wealthy young woman – with her back under his control he can access those funds.’

Adam smiled. ‘Another reason to send Leo as he’s already half in love with the girl.’

There was a light tap on the door and a footman came to announce that the family was waiting to walk across to the chapel for matins. A late breakfast would be served on their return. The lavish Christmas meal would be eaten at five o’clock and then there would be parlour games such as Bite the Bullet and Charades.

How different this day was to last year. Then there had been only the two of them to go to church and today not only was his twin now the Earl of Somiton, but they were accompanied by the relic of the previous earl, her unmarried daughter, Grace, as well as Eleanor and her new husband Edward.

Along with these came Eloise and Amelia Somiton whose mother had participated in the attempted murder of the male members of the family in order for Oliver Somiton to steal the title and the inheritance that went with it. Mrs Somiton, the mother of Leo and Frances, had

Jessica walking with her.

The weather was crisp and cold, the service mercifully short, and at eleven o'clock all twelve of them sat down around the magnificent dining table. The breakfast parlour had been abandoned for today in honour of the occasion.

Although a thoroughly enjoyable day Richard found it difficult to immerse himself in the excitement and celebration. His thoughts constantly turned to Demelza and her brothers and he sent up a fervent prayer to the Almighty that they were safe and well and that he'd hear soon from Manson to that effect.

## Chapter Ten

The days passed slowly and Demelza was bored. Obviously, they had no visitors and she envied the fact that her brothers and the new member of their household were able to go out and do masculine things and keep themselves occupied. Even the dog had abandoned her and spent his time with Manson – Uncle Albert as he was now known.

She was relieved when Twelfth Night was gone and she could then busy herself removing the greenery and other decorations. The weather, which had been abysmal, improved sufficiently for her to dress warmly and take her pencils and paper out to begin sketches for the first of her series of landscapes.

The third week in January was remarkably mild and she thought she would go further afield and see if she could draw Frankston Manor from a different viewpoint.

‘Jenny, I need my warmest clothes and I’ll wear my breeches. I’m going to ride and find myself somewhere with a vantage that allows me to paint this house from a distance.’

‘Oh, miss, I wouldn’t do that. The weather’s closing in and you’re like to get drenched or worse.’

Demelza went to the window and all she could see was a clear blue sky. ‘I shall be no more than a mile or two away and a little rain never hurt anyone. It looks fine to me. I’ll take Billy with me as he always knows when the weather’s about to change.’

With her haversack of sketching materials over her shoulder she went in search of her brothers or Uncle Albert. She’d no intention of riding anywhere without letting one of them know what she was

about.

The dog greeted her with enthusiasm but she saw no sign of the gentlemen she wished to speak to. Should she go without seeing them? She deliberated for a moment and then decided as she didn't intend to leave the estate, and as she would have Billy with her, the fact that she hadn't actually told anyone, apart from Jenny, where she was going didn't matter.

On arrival at the stable yard she saw that the other saddle horses were absent from their stalls. If her brothers and Uncle Albert had felt no need to inform her of their whereabouts then she need not feel guilty about her omission. She saddled one of the carriage team herself. She'd decided to ride astride as a man's saddle was so much lighter to handle than her own.

It was some time since she'd ridden but she soon got back into the rhythm and enjoyed several exhilarating canters before turning back and starting to look seriously for a place where she could see the house.

So engrossed was she in her sketching that she didn't notice the heavy rain clouds approaching rapidly from the sea. The first she knew about the storm was when a gust of wind all but took her papers from beneath her hand. This was followed by a face full of icy rain.

It took several minutes to gather her belongings together, tighten the gelding's girth and pull back the blanket covering him so she could mount.

'Stand still, there's a good fellow. We'll soon be home again.'

She was scarcely settled in the saddle, her boots firmly in the stirrup irons, when the heavens opened and within seconds she was drenched to the skin. The rain was so heavy she could scarcely see the way forward and had to rely on the good sense of her horse to take her home.

All might have been well if the shallow stream she'd crossed with no difficulty earlier hadn't swelled and become a raging torrent. Sinbad, on seeing the foaming brown water stopped suddenly and dropped his head. She wasn't paying full attention and was catapulted from the saddle to land on her back in the water.

Although it wasn't deep there was sufficient to cover her, to tumble her over and over unable to raise her head above the water and take in a gulp of much-needed air. There was a footbridge over the stream and this saved her. From somewhere she found the strength to reach out and grab a wooden pillar and hang on for dear life.

Gasping, spluttering for breath, she clung on until her head cleared sufficiently for her to force her frozen limbs to respond to her command. Somehow, she dragged herself out of the icy water and collapsed on the grassy bank unable to move.

She was strangely calm, no longer terrified, not even cold. She was tired and a sleep was exactly what she needed. She closed her eyes and a welcome blackness enveloped her. Billy whined and nudged her but she ignored him.

From a distance she heard someone calling her name but she was too far away to answer. She didn't want to speak to anyone. Then she drifted off again.

'Demelza, come on, lass, you need to make an effort. Wake up and look at us.'

She didn't know the voice but whoever it was, was so insistent that she forced her heavy eyelids open. At first she didn't recognise her surroundings – this wasn't her bedchamber at Seaview.

Johnny's face appeared before her. 'You almost drowned, if it hadn't been for Billy we wouldn't have found you in time. The doctor says you have a congestion of the lungs. You must fight to get well – we cannot lose you too.'

She didn't have the energy to answer but understood his words. She squeezed his hand and tried to smile. Her brother gulped, tears ran down his cheeks and he leaned down and placed his wet face against hers.

Had she fallen into the sea? She couldn't quite remember what had happened – but she recalled being wet and cold and then falling asleep. Her mind was woolly, her limbs so weak she couldn't move them, but she understood that she was desperately ill. Her chest was tight, breathing was painful and having been cold before, now she was

too hot.

A vision of Pa and Mama filled her head. They were holding hands, looked happy and she wanted to be with them.

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Richard was working with Adam, their two secretaries were busy in the corner scribbling letters that would be sent later that day, when they were disturbed by a bang on the door and it flew open without either of them giving permission for the person on the other side to enter. Jessica rushed in waving a letter that had come by express.

‘This arrived just now. It’s for you, Richard.’

He snatched it from her hand and broke the seal and read the contents with horror.

‘Good God, brother, you’ve gone as pale as a ghost. Show me.’ Adam removed the letter from his limp grasp and immediately took charge.

‘You must go. Pray God that you’re in time.’

Less than an hour later Richard was galloping to the inn from where he would travel post-chaise all the way to Cornwall. Manson’s brief letter had said that Demelza was dying and he should come at once.

Travelling over three hundred miles by post-chaise wasn’t pleasant but it was the fastest way to get anywhere. The postillions changed with the team and returned with their horses from whence they’d come. Richard slept in the vehicle, spent only the few minutes it took to change teams to eat and visit the facilities.

He arrived at Frankston Manor unshaven and unkempt late afternoon on the following day. The front door opened as he stormed up the steps.

‘Thank God, you’re in time, Richard. Her life’s hanging by a thread,’ Johnny said as he gripped his arms and all but dragged him inside.

‘Take me to her. Have you got a doctor in attendance? How is she so ill?’

The lad explained as they raced up the stairs and it was as if a weight settled on Richard’s chest. None of this would have happened

if he'd not interfered in their lives. If this lovely girl died, he would blame himself.

The chamber he walked into was stifflingly hot, the fire roaring and the metallic smell of fresh blood filled his nostrils. The damned quack was in the process of bleeding her. In two strides he was across the room.

‘Enough. Your methods are antiquated and murderous. Get out of here before I pitch you out head first.’

The grey-haired, portly gentleman snatched up his paraphernalia and muttering dire threats ran from the room. Silas had been standing, ashen-faced, at the end of the bed watching the procedure.

Where the devil was Manson? He should have known better than to allow this to have happened.

‘Get the windows opened, put the fire out. The heat and the bleeding are what’s killing her.’

Demelza was lying deathly still, her colour the same as the pillows her head lay upon. He prayed he wasn’t too late. He snatched her up and carried her to the window seat wrapped in the comforter. Johnny had already flung it open and an icy breeze was blasting in.

Somehow, he jammed himself onto the seat with her in his lap so his bulk protected her from the worst of the wind but she would be cooler.

‘There’s something in my greatcoat pocket that you need. Have those pieces of bark simmered in water and then bring the liquid to me when it’s cool enough. She needs to drink. Is that barley water in the jug beside her bed? Also, I need cold cloths to bathe her forehead.’

The boys didn’t question his authority to give orders or disagree with his unusual requests. He and Adam had become firm friends years ago with a ship’s physician who told them how he’d successfully treated fever in this way.

The bark was a miracle cure for the ague and he hoped it would have the same dramatic effect on the fever caused by this congestion of the lungs that Demelza was suffering from. Her breathing was shallow, laboured, and her skin was hot and dry to the touch.

Four hours after he arrived he’d managed to spoon a goodly



quantity of the medicine into her as well as half a glass of barley water. The fire had been reduced to a glow, sufficient to keep the room above freezing. There was still no sign of Manson and he was concerned about his absence.

‘Here, Richard, let me sit with her for a while. There’s food on the tray over there for you and a pot of coffee.’ Johnny held out his arms and with some reluctance he handed over his precious burden.

‘Where’s Manson? I expected him to be in charge of matters here.’

Silas answered from the chair he was slumped into, his shape barely discernible in the light of a single candle. ‘He went to send the letter yesterday and didn’t return. Billy went with him and he’s not back either.’

‘Tarnation take it – that’s all we need at the moment. There’s something amiss as he wouldn’t have stayed away otherwise. Johnny, first thing tomorrow morning you and Silas must go in search of him.’

He stretched his cramped limbs and flexed his arms for a few minutes before heading for the tray. He was sharp-set as he hadn’t eaten since morning. He scarcely knew what he devoured but he felt better after it. After draining the coffee pot, he left the boys to take care of their sister whilst he used the room allocated to Manson to wash the dirt from his person, replace his stock with a fresh one and quickly scrape the worst of the bristles from his cheeks.

By midnight he thought Demelza’s fever had diminished a little and it would be safe to put her into bed as long as she wasn’t covered with a dozen blankets as she had been before.

‘I’ll stay here and take care of her, boys. You get some shut-eye. I promise I’ll fetch you if there’s any change. I’ll not send for that idiot doctor again.’

The bed was more than large enough for him to stretch out beside her and still leave a yard between them. He was certain he’d wake instantly if she moved. He ached in every joint and stretching out in the comfort of a bed that could accommodate his length without his feet sticking out of the end was a luxury he couldn’t resist.

He spooned some more of the bark infusion and barley water into her mouth before hooking off his boots and carefully climbing onto

the bed beside her. He'd discarded his stock, waistcoat and topcoat hours ago.

The window was open just enough to allow fresh air to circulate. He pulled a comforter over himself, placed his palm on her forehead to check her fever, and was satisfied that she was definitely cooler than she had been when he'd arrived. Her breathing was slightly less laboured too which was a good sign

He awoke with a start not sure for a second where he was. He rolled on his side facing Demelza. She hadn't moved, her eyes were closed, she was still fevered. If she was no worse, then she was certainly no better than she had been when he fell asleep.

He rolled out of bed and repeated the laborious process of trickling liquid into her mouth. In order to do this he put his arm around her shoulders and lifted her to a semi-prone position. He tended to the fire, replaced the candles which were guttering in their candlesticks, and clambered back onto the bed.

The clock told him he'd been asleep for three hours. That was enough to refresh him. He wouldn't sleep again. He wondered if she would hear him if he spoke to her despite the fact that she was apparently comatose.

'Sweetheart, you must make an effort to get well. Your brothers cannot manage without you to guide them. As soon as you're recovered I'm taking you all back to Somiton. You'll be safe there and Estelle and the girls will be good company.'

There was no response but he expected none. Some impulse made him take her hand, it was small and fragile, and in that moment he knew he owed it to this family to give up his freedom so he could take care of them.

'My love, we shall get married and then I'll apply to become your brothers' guardian. We can make the east wing of Somiton Hall our own – it's more than large enough for the four of us and our staff.'

Her hand moved slightly in his and he raised it to his lips and kissed her knuckles gently. It didn't matter that he wasn't in love with her, what mattered was that she needed him. Hadn't he and Adam just been discussing that it was time they became leg-shackled? His

wouldn't be a love match like the one that Eleanor and Edward had, but he would make her happy.

He blinked back tears. He might not feel romantic love for her but he would be devastated if she died. He wanted to protect her, keep her safe, give her the life she deserved and that would have to do. Johnny and Silas were now like his younger siblings and they too had become dear to him.

He moved the pillows up behind his head and settled back. He wasn't going to sleep again tonight. Where the hell was Manson? Something untoward had happened to his man or he would have returned by now.

The more he dwelt on it the more concerned he was. Had Trenwith's minions discovered him and done him harm? If that was the case then it wouldn't be long before this place was discovered and Trenwith and his lawyers would arrive and take the family into his custody.

The alternative explanation was that there had been an accident of some sort – this was an even worse scenario as it could mean Manson was lying in a ditch somewhere. No one could survive in those circumstances even if the initial injury had been relatively minor.

If Demelza continued to improve then he would organise the search and lead it himself. However, if she remained unresponsive then he wouldn't leave her side. He dozed beside her getting up twice more to repeat the process of spooning liquid into her.

When the door quietly opened at six o'clock, he was beginning to believe the worst was over. Fortunately, he was no longer reclining on the bed but standing beside it.

'How is she? You didn't fetch us, which must be good news,' Johnny said as he and Silas crept in in their stockinged feet.

'See for yourself, she's breathing more freely, her fever is definitely lower and although not awake she's definitely much improved.'

The boys crowded round and then embraced him. 'Uncle Albert said she would fight harder if you were here. Thank you for saving her life,' Johnny said as he stepped away wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

‘Who the devil’s Uncle Albert?’

‘Your Mr Manson of course. He’s part of the family now so we had to find him a more suitable name. We must go in search of him at first light. I don’t understand why Billy didn’t return. He would have done so if Uncle Albert had taken a tumble. He came to fetch us when Demelza fell in the river.’

‘We need to call in a more professional physician not that antiquated person who was doing his best to kill her. I’ll send a letter by express to Henwood – if he comes by post-chaise then he can be here later this morning.’

\*

Manson groaned and tried to move but the pain in his broken ankle was excruciating. How had he allowed himself to get into this situation? All he’d had to do was ride to Bodmin and send the letter by express to his employer about Demelza’s possible demise and then return to Frankston Manor.

He’d been no more than three miles from his destination when his horse had gone lame. He’d dismounted to examine the hoof and was relieved to find it just a stone that was easy to remove. As he was about to clamber into the saddle a bull, that had he hadn’t realised was behind the hedge, took exception to Billy’s presence and bellowed and charged the greenery.

The horse had careered backwards, he’d lost his footing and fallen badly breaking his ankle. With some difficulty he’d regained his feet but was unable to go after his horse who’d bolted down the lane.

‘I can’t hop two miles, Billy old boy, so I’ll have to lean on you and try and reach that abandoned cottage I can see just ahead.’

Without the support of the dog he’d not have made it. He was drenched in sweat by the time he’d hopped into the derelict building. The youngsters needed him – Demelza could die. He just had to pray someone would come along soon and rescue him.

Now he’d spent two nights here and only the warmth of the dog had kept him from freezing to death.

## Chapter Eleven

Demelza opened her eyes and looked around in desperation. For a moment she thought she was alone and then her maid, Jenny, was at her side with a beaming smile.

‘Here you are, I’ll slide the po under you. You’re not getting out of bed today.’

‘Just in time,’ she said but her voice sounded strange as if it didn’t belong to her. In fact, everything seemed odd, different, and she wasn’t sure quite what it was.

A few minutes later she flopped back onto the pillows exhausted by even so small an effort on her part. Her throat was sore, her eyes dry and her head hurt. When Jenny held the glass to her mouth she swallowed obediently and then immediately fell back to sleep.

The next time she woke she could hear voices but didn’t have the energy to open her eyes. Why was Richard here? Then she vaguely recalled him talking to her saying that they would be getting married soon – or had she imagined that?

Then he was beside her. ‘We know you’re awake, sweetheart, so don’t pretend.’

Her eyes flickered open. ‘Go away, all of you, I’m not well enough to speak to you.’

Immediately her brothers appeared on the other side of the bed and they were laughing as if she’d made the best jest ever. Why should her being so ill make them so happy?

‘Thank goodness, we thought you’d never wake and take an interest. Jenny’s gone to fetch you some soup – you’ve not eaten

anything for a sennight and are as thin as a wraith,' Silas said as he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. He wasn't given to such demonstrations and she was puzzled by his action.

Johnny took his place. 'You and Uncle Albert have given us quite a scare.'

He had her full attention now despite the fact that she felt wretched. 'What do you mean? What's wrong with Uncle Albert?'

'He fell off his horse and broke his ankle and was marooned in a cottage for almost two days before we found him. Billy kept him warm. Doctor Henwood has set it very well and if he keeps off it for another two weeks then he'll make a full recovery.'

'How was Doctor Henwood here?'

'Richard sent for him as the local physician was hopeless.'

This was all too much for her, too confusing and she was just too tired to continue the discussion. She was about to drop off to sleep when Richard leaned down and without a by your leave pulled her upright in the bed.

'No you don't, young lady, you will eat before you sleep again.'

'No...' Then the appetising smell of vegetable potage drifted across to her and her mouth watered. He sat beside her and spooned the delicious soup into her mouth as if she was a babe in arms. She still didn't know what he was doing there but didn't care. She was just pleased to see him.

Chewing wasn't possible as it took too much energy. However, she drank all the soup she was offered and then he helped her to slide down onto the pillows and tenderly covered her with the blankets. She drifted off to sleep and this time didn't have terrifying nightmares.

The next time she opened her eyes the room was dark apart from a single candle flickering on the mantelpiece.

'Do you want the commode, sweetheart? I'll carry you there.'

She hadn't until he'd mentioned it and now her need was urgent. The thought of him attending to her filled her with horror but having an embarrassing accident in the bed would be even worse.

'Yes, please.'

He handled it with tact and the minimum of fuss. There was a

chair next to the commode and he put her on it whilst he pulled the screen around and removed the lid. He then vanished leaving her only to shuffle across, which she managed without too much difficulty.

She repeated the process in reverse and even managed to replace the lid. 'Thank you, Richard, I'm ready to return to bed.'

The screen was whisked away and she was picked up and returned to her bed and tucked in as if he'd spent all his life acting as a nursemaid.

'I'm going down to the kitchen to get you something to eat and drink. Your fever has gone and your colour is almost normal.'

Her mouth watered at the thought of food and her stomach gurgled loudly. His chuckle made her feel a hundred times better. 'I don't care what it is but nothing too hard to swallow as my throat is still rather sore.'

'I'll see what I can find. You'd be surprised how adept I am in the culinary department. Adam and I weren't always wealthy men.'

He lit a candle from the one that was burning and then vanished silently. He wasn't wearing his boots and had gone to the kitchen in his stockinged feet. She wasn't entirely sure what day of the week it was or even if it was still January.

The only thing she knew was that the good Lord had decided to spare her and Uncle Albert. From this moment on she would live every day to the full, as even a healthy young lady like herself could be struck down unexpectedly.

Whilst she waited for Richard to return, for the first time in what she thought might be more than two weeks, she was able to think clearly, could recall the horrific circumstances that had led her to this position.

A more worrying memory was that Richard had definitely said they would be married as soon as she was well and that she was quite certain he'd slept beside her on this very bed more than once. She closed her eyes and mulled over this set of facts trying to decide how she felt about it.

One thing she knew was that she hated living this masquerade, being isolated from her neighbours, unable to converse for more than

a few minutes in case she revealed the truth. Not only that, there was the constant anxiety that they might be discovered and snatched away by Sir Hugo.

If she married Richard then she would be safe and so would her brothers. They could live a normal life, there would be no more need to dissemble. He was a handsome man, tall, with black hair and eyes so dark they seemed almost black too. He was wealthy, his brother was the Earl of Somiton. None of these things would be enough for her to agree to be his wife if he wasn't also kind, intelligent and had a good sense of humour.

She didn't love him the way that her mother had loved her father but she was very fond of him and liked him a lot. Sharing his bed would be no hardship as he made her heart skip a beat and the thought of his attentions in their marital bed made her almost dizzy with excitement.

He returned with a tray upon which was soup, accompanied by slices of plum cake and a large pot of coffee. For the first time since she'd been laid low by her almost fatal illness she was able to feed herself. The soup was entirely hers but he shared the cake and the coffee.

'There, you'll feel so much better now you're eating, sweetheart. We've much to talk about now you're properly awake.'

'Did I imagine that you said we were to be married, that you were going to take us to Somiton Hall as soon as I was well?'

He laughed out loud at her boldness. 'I wasn't sure if you'd heard me. You're right, I want to marry you. Indeed, my love, after the amount of time I've spent alone in your bedchamber it would be the scandal of the century if we didn't tie the knot as soon as possible.'

'I see. Is that to be my proposal? No dramatic falling to one knee and an outpouring of romantic nonsense?'

At her words he removed the tray and immediately dropped to one knee. He clasped his hands to his chest like a nincompoop. 'Miss Trenwith, will you make me the happiest of men, will you agree to be my wife?'

'You're making a cake of yourself, Richard. There's no need for



that sort of flummery between us. This isn't exactly an arranged marriage as we're entering it of our own free will. I will marry you; I'd be mad not to. We might not be in love with each other but I like you, respect you and know that you will make me an excellent husband and father to any children we might be blessed with in the future.

'However, I wouldn't be agreeing to your proposal if it wasn't for my brothers. They need the guidance of a strong gentleman to avoid falling into bad ways. Also, I hate the way we're living now and wish to be free of the worry of Sir Hugo arriving with his lawyers.'

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Richard regained his feet and leaned over and placed a kiss on her forehead. Too soon for anything more intimate. 'Then we're betrothed. I took the liberty of sending word to Adam yesterday asking him to obtain a special licence from Bishop's Court. He'll come with it himself so he can witness our nuptials.'

Her eyes widened in shock and he cursed himself for his ineptitude. 'Don't be alarmed, my dear, like you I just wish to ensure that you and your brothers are safe and you won't be until the knot is tied. I can assure you it will be some time before I make love to you however much I might wish to do so.

'You've been gravely ill, are still as weak as a kitten, and until you're fully recovered, I'll not importune you in any way. The east wing of Somiton Hall is bigger by far than Seaview and there are ample rooms for you to have your own apartment.'

'Thank you, that's very understanding of you. As soon as I'm well...'

'I know, little one, but there's no need to worry about that as it will be several weeks – possibly months – before you've regained the weight you've lost and are the lively, wonderful young lady you were before.'

He tried to stop his yawn but failed miserably. Her smile was radiant. 'Sleep next to me, you've already done so several times before and now that we're about to be married it matters not what anyone thinks about this arrangement.'

As he had no boots on and was wearing only his breeches and

shirt it was a matter of moments for him to join her on the huge bed. She rolled over to face him and he reached out and pushed back a strand of hair. Despite the fact that she'd lost far too much weight, that her face was pinched and her nose too sharp she was beautiful both inside and out.

‘Good night, sweetheart, I promise you’ll not regret your decision to marry me.’

She sighed and closed her eyes and he thought she was asleep. As he was drifting off she spoke again. ‘I hope that *you* don’t regret your decision to marry me, Richard.’

The sound of the curtains being pulled back roused him. Demelza was still sleeping peacefully beside him. He reached out and touched her forehead and was delighted it was still cool. The fever had definitely gone.

Had the maid not noticed him? He didn’t want to startle her by suddenly appearing but could hardly remain where he was.

‘You stop there, sir, you both needed your sleep. I’ll have your breakfast up here in a jiffy, don’t you fret.’

He rolled out of the bed and stretched. ‘It’s more comfortable here than sharing with Manson. However, I’ll leave you to see to your mistress whilst I complete my morning ablutions. I’ll be back for my breakfast in half an hour.’

Manson rolled his eyes when he walked in. ‘It’s past nine o’clock, sir, I was wondering what had become of you.’

‘I think we must dispense with this *sir* nonsense, don’t you? As my future wife’s family think of you as their uncle then I can hardly treat you as anything but family. Please call me Richard and I’ll address you as Albert.’

‘Righto, seems fair enough to me. When are you tying the knot?’

‘As soon as my brother gets here with the special licence. I’m not anticipating any problems but you never know – Demelza is underage after all.’

‘I don’t care what that doctor says, I’m coming down for the wedding. I wouldn’t miss it for the world. I haven’t any family of my

own and those three youngsters have adopted me and I'll not let them down.'

Richard stripped and hastily pulled on clean garments. There was already warm water in the jug and he shaved himself and tied his stock.

'As soon as Demelza's well enough I'm taking them all back to Somiton. We're going to live in the east wing. I hope you'll move in with us. I have to be away on business frequently as you know and will be able to do so without worry if you're there in my stead.'

'You'll need a new valet.'

'I already have one as I didn't intend to keep you in that position when you returned. I was going to make you my man of business – I hope you're still prepared to work for me in some capacity?'

The man looked at him as if he was speaking in tongues. He thumped the bed. 'I didn't intend to be idle, Richard. I'll pull my weight and earn my keep.' He grinned making him look much younger than his years. 'I'm hoping that the boys will want to go on a grand tour and I can accompany them. I've not travelled much and a trip around the continent would do me just fine.'

'I'd not thought of that as an occupation for them. Now Bonaparte's incarcerated it's safe to travel and I see no reason why you shouldn't do exactly that. I'll give it some thought.'

'It was a jest. You'd be better sending your secretary – he speaks a half a dozen languages. I can do most of the things he does apart from writing all your letters. My hand isn't as fair as his.'

'I'll send both of you. That way I can be sure the boys won't get into mischief. I'll discuss it with Adam when he gets here. We'll carry you down – I'll not have you walking on that ankle.'

'I've got a decent set of crutches that Johnny made for me. I reckon I can use them easy enough when I'm allowed to get up again.'

'Another week of bed rest before you can hop around. By the way, I've employed a groom to take care of the horses. There'll be a team of four and a carriage arriving sometime next week.'

Satisfied he looked presentable Richard strode back to Demelza and found she already had visitors who were making inroads into *his*

breakfast.

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Demelza laughed when she saw Richard's expression. 'Don't worry, Jenny has already gone down for more. You look very smart – I'm going to bathe and get up later.'

All three of them roared at her that she'd do no such thing. Somewhat startled by the vehemence she looked at Richard for an explanation.

'Sweetheart, you've been desperately ill for nearly two weeks. You only woke up yesterday and I'm not allowing you out of bed until the doctor has agreed that you're well enough.'

'How long will that be? I cannot imagine that Doctor Henwood will be happy to trek all this way again for a while.'

'He came a week ago and is returning tomorrow to check on both you and Albert. I doubt that you'll be allowed to resume normal life for a while but if he agrees, then I'll carry you to your daybed and you can rest there.'

'I'm not a package, Richard. I don't need to be carried anywhere.'

Jenny, at that moment, accompanied by another maid, staggered in with the replenishments. 'Mr Manson has his breakfast and Dolly has sent everything else she had ready, miss.'

The trays were put on the bureau and the two girls knew better than to wait. Richard piled his plate with what looked like ham and coddled eggs, poured himself coffee and brought both to her bedside.

Her brothers were sitting where he'd spent the night so he took the end of the bed. They munched almost in unison and paid her no attention. She loved to see a gentleman with a healthy appetite – in fact these three were very dear to her and the thought that they would be living as one family as soon as she was well helped to restore her pitiful appetite.

'If you could pause from stuffing food down your face like a pig in a trough, Richard, I'd like some eggs and more coffee, please.'

He swallowed his mouthful, laughed at her, put his half-eaten breakfast on the bed and removed her empty plate and cup. 'Your word is my command, my dear. You only have to ask and I'll do

whatever you wish.’ This was said with all sincerity as if he actually believed what he’d spoken.

Her brothers collapsed in snorts and gurgles of laughter at his statement. Soon she too was giggling. He looked from one to the other of them in bemusement for a second. Then his eyes crinkled endearingly at the corners and he joined in the merriment.

‘I’ll hold you to that, Richard, once we’re wed. I think my first demand will be a hundred new gowns, my second – let me think – a fine carriage of my own and a riding horse commensurate with my new status.’ She was ticking these off on her fingers as she spoke and watching his face carefully.

‘If I really thought you wanted those things then I’d see that you had them. I’ve deep pockets and from now on you and the boys are my priority.’

This time nobody laughed. He was staring intently at her and there was something in his eyes that she didn’t recognise.

‘I’ll not be a demanding wife, but I can’t promise to be an obedient one.’

He turned his back on them and strolled across to the trays and began to collect what she’d asked for. ‘Be yourself, sweetheart, I ask for nothing more.’

## Chapter Twelve

Two weeks after Richard had travelled so precipitously to Cornwall, he remained at Frankston Manor happily sharing a bed chamber with his ex-valet and now firm friend. Albert was now hobbling about on his crutches and Demelza, although still painfully thin, was spending the afternoons downstairs with her family.

Johnny stared gloomily out of the sitting room window. 'I doubt that the earl will come today. It's done nothing but rain this past week and the roads will be impassable.'

'Remember that he's travelling in our carriage. This means he's limited as to how far and how fast he can journey before the horses are blown. He left Somiton a week ago – he'll be here today regardless of the weather.'

'Richard, I hope you've sworn the curate to secrecy. Imagine the gossip that would be racing around the neighbourhood if they heard that I, the supposed wife of a sailor, is preparing to marry someone else.'

He smiled at the girl who was about to become his wife. 'There'd be an even bigger scandal if we didn't get married, Demelza, the amount of time we've spent alone in your bedchamber.'

Her cheeks coloured and she pursed her lips. 'I was at death's door, you beast, and everybody here is well aware of that fact.' She shrugged and made a dismissive gesture with her hand. 'I don't give a fig for what anyone says. I just wish your brother would arrive and we can get this matter settled.'

They heard the front door bang and Silas burst in, his greatcoat

mud-spattered and his boots far worse. He was smiling. 'The carriage is no more than three miles from here. I say, Richard, if I hadn't known you were already here, I'd have thought you were coming.'

Everyone laughed and he nodded happily. 'We're identical twins. Slightly different in personality but apart from that I defy anyone to tell us apart.'

Silas, ignoring the mud that he was leaving on the boards, headed for the door again. 'I'll go and fetch the curate, shall I?'

Richard looked at her detecting some nervousness that hadn't been apparent before. Immediately he was at her side and took her hands in his regardless of the fact that he had an interested audience of Albert and Johnny. As he sat beside her he heard the door close softly – the others had left them to speak alone. He took her hands in his – they were trembling.

'Sweetheart, this is what we both want. But if you're having second thoughts...'

'It's not that. I've had an awful premonition these past few days that somehow Sir Hugo will arrive and ruin everything.'

'Even if he'd come, he wouldn't have got into the house. It doesn't matter how many lawyers he might have had with him – he'd take you and the boys over my dead body.'

His vehemence made her smile and a wave of something he didn't recognise washed over him. He might not love her but he would protect her with his own life if necessary.

'I'm sure you could prevent him from breaking in – that was never in any doubt. What I'm not sure about is whether this marriage without his consent would be considered valid if he cared to contest it. Also, what about my brothers? Will our marriage prevent them from being snatched away?'

'No court in the land will set aside our marriage. I'm not a fortune hunter, there was no coercion or seduction involved, it's a good match for both of us and has the approval of the Earl of Somiton. As to your brothers – Adam already has that in hand. He has powerful friends and they should be Somiton wards in a week or two.'

She smiled and pulled one hand free and rested it against his

cheek. 'I've got the best of the bargain, Richard, and we both know that. My parents will be smiling down on us knowing that their children are safe from harm.'

It took all his control not to lean over and kiss her on the mouth. Instead he trapped the hand against his face for a second and then moved it so he could kiss her knuckles. This wouldn't do – he must keep his lustful thoughts to himself until she was fully recovered.

'Do you have something special to wear for this auspicious occasion?'

'I don't have the energy to change and anyway this is one of my prettiest gowns. Nothing fits me as it should as I've lost so much weight. You, as always, look quite splendid so there's no need for you to alter your appearance.'

'This isn't exactly how I'd imagined my wedding day would be. Like all young ladies I thought I'd walk down the aisle on the arm of my father with my family in attendance to marry a gentleman I was head over heels in love with. A private ceremony in here with those I love will have to do in the circumstances.'

'You look lovely as always, sweetheart. Your hair has regained its lustre, your eyes are shining and that blue velvet gown suits you to perfection.'

'Richard, I don't suppose anyone has thought to tell Dolly that the earl's about to arrive. His room's already prepared as the boys were only too happy to share a bedroom again, but there must be a celebration luncheon served.'

There were no bell-straps to pull, no actual bells to ring in this small establishment. Orders were conveyed directly to the staff. In fact, all he had to do was open the door and yell and Dolly would hear him perfectly well in the kitchen.

Somehow she anticipated his thoughts and grabbed his hand as he stood up. 'Don't you dare, Mr Somiton. I'll not have shouting in my house.'

He smiled and dropped a kiss on top of her head and went in search of one of the maids to convey the necessary instructions. As soon as the weather improved, the roads were drier, they would set



out for Somiton. The journeymen would continue to take care of the birds and gardens and Dolly and the three new girls had agreed to accompany them.

The logistics of the journey were complicated. Silas and Johnny would ride and lead Albert's horse. The dog would have to travel with them as he certainly wasn't coming into the carriage. This meant that Demelza, Albert, Adam and himself would be inside the luxurious carriage his brother was about to arrive in.

Dawkins would drive the small carriage as before and the four maids and housekeeper would travel in that. They would be somewhat cramped, but the journey would be stately as they would have to stop at midday to rest the horses and then overnight at least seven times before finally reaching home.

The trunks were already packed and they were ready to depart. Adam was well aware how many would be returning with him. Finding sufficient overnight accommodation for so large a party wouldn't have been easy but he was confident there'd be nothing to complain about. Few people would be travelling at the beginning of February and the hostelrys would have ample space even for so many.

An hour later he was standing beside Demelza exchanging his vows. Albert and Adam were the witnesses and in less than half an hour he was a married man. The certificate was signed, the entry made in the parish register, and the document handed to his new bride as was customary.

Adam had brought a wedding band for Demelza which was a little loose on her finger. Richard hoped that soon enough it would fit her properly. He put his arm around her waist and turned her towards him. Without his prompting she looked up, her eyes wide, her lips parted and he needed no further encouragement.

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At the touch of Richard's lips on hers Demelza glowed all over. A delicious tingling spread from her crown to her toes and she returned the pressure. He raised his head and his eyes were dark, exciting,

dangerous even.

How could he desire her when she was little more than a bag of bones? In that moment she determined to improve her health and become the young woman she'd used to be. When she went to his bed her womanly curves would be restored as at the moment there was little difference between her front and her back.

He kept his arm around her and she loved the strength and warmth of it. His brother kissed her on the cheek and then Johnny and Silas hugged her fiercely. Uncle Albert hung back but she moved out of Richard's embrace and went across to him.

'I'm so glad that you were here to witness my wedding. We're going to be such a happy family together in Somiton.' She stretched up on tiptoes and kissed his leathery cheek and after a second's hesitation he put his arms around her and gave her a brief hug.

Dolly had worked her usual magic and they sat down to a delicious feast and she ate as much as she could manage knowing that if she didn't, she wouldn't recover her strength. There were toasts drunk, but she refused the alcohol, and when Richard swept her up into his arms at five o'clock she was more than ready to retire.

She rested her head against his shoulder for once not objecting to being carried. She doubted that her legs had the strength to convey her anywhere.

'You've overdone it, sweetheart, I'm not sure you're ready to travel so far and in such unpleasant weather.'

'Dawkins said one of the journeymen is certain the rain will stop tonight and then it will freeze for several days. We must leave regardless of my health as soon as that happens.'

'No one can hurt you or your siblings now. Stop worrying, sweetheart, that's my prerogative. I'm your husband, your protector, I'll take care of you.'

He placed her gently on the bed but seemed reluctant to release her. She slid her arms around his neck and tilted her face encouraging him to kiss her again.

'No, you little temptress, if I kiss you then things will go too far.'

His words were like a bucket of icy water being tipped over her

head. She wouldn't encourage him again until she was sure she looked her best. He mustn't be disappointed in his bride.

'Do you know, husband, that although you and Adam are identical, I felt nothing when *he* kissed me.' As soon as she'd said the words she realised she'd revealed more than she'd intended about her feelings for him.

His smile made her toes curl. 'Are you telling me, my darling, that you find me desirable?'

'You know that I do. When I'm well I can assure you that I'll be eager to begin my marital duties.'

He cupped her face and kissed her, his lips hard, quite different from the wedding kiss. 'And I can assure you, wife, that what will take place between us will be no duty but a pleasure for both of us.' Then he was gone and the room seemed strangely empty without his presence.

This house was now bursting at the seams and she understood that if she was to live the life she wished then they needed to be in bigger premises. Instead of dreading moving into such a prestigious and enormous house as Somiton Hall she was looking forward to it. Uncle Albert was a part of the family and required his own accommodation and it was inconvenient for Richard to be sharing with his brother because there were insufficient chambers for all of them.

How life had changed in a little over a year. Pa had met his maker far away and left them all but destitute because of some financial mismanagement by the bank. Richard had arrived to put things right and then Mama had gone to be with her beloved partner. The obnoxious Sir Hugo had turned up and wished to take control of herself and her brothers. She had become gravely ill and now she was married – no longer Miss Trenwith but Mrs Richard Somiton and sister-in-law to the Earl of Somiton.

As she was drifting off to sleep it occurred to her that by rights she and Richard shouldn't have married until the year's mourning was up. None of them had been wearing black and yet Mama had only been gone a few weeks. This was hardly respectful and from tomorrow she would don black again and ask her brothers to do the same. As they

were no longer masquerading they could resume their true identities.

Jenny came in cheerily with the morning chocolate. 'Fine and crisp out there, ma'am, I reckon we'll be off tomorrow if the weather holds like this.'

The curtains rattled back, the shutters were thrown open and sunlight streamed into the bedchamber.

'I need to put my black gown on, Jenny. Can you find it for me?'

'I left both of them behind, ma'am, not thinking you'd have need of them.'

'Then I'll have to purchase black material and make myself another.'

There was a light tap and the door swung open before she could answer and Richard strolled in looking handsome. His smile made her tingle all over.

'Good morning, my love, did I hear you say you're going back into black?'

'I must, Richard, it's only right. Mama deserves to be mourned and not pushed aside in this way as if her demise was of no consequence.'

'Adam and I've been talking about this very matter a moment ago. Of course you and your brothers must respect Mrs Trenwith's demise, but how can I ask the other members of my extended family to follow?'

'I know it will be hard for them as they didn't know my mother and they don't know me.'

'The five girls are having their come out next Season. There will be three grand balls in the house in Grosvenor Square and the invitations have been sent and I'm expected to help escort my cousins.'

She frowned. 'Are you telling me in a roundabout way that you don't intend to go into black with me and my brothers? You are my husband – if it was one of your family then I'd support you in this without hesitation.'

'I'm not asking you to accompany me to Town, that would be highly unsuitable in the circumstances. However, the arrangements

have been made...’

‘You told me that Lady Eleanor married your business partner in the summer. What if one of those died? Would your cousins still dash off to Town as if nothing untoward had occurred?’

He flinched at her harsh tone and for a moment she thought she’d angered him. Then he dropped down beside her on the bed and gathered her close.

‘I humbly apologise for my insensitivity. You’re right to castigate me. Everyone will observe the period of mourning. Would you agree to six months for my cousins?’

‘That will be quite acceptable. I believe that the main Season doesn’t start until the end of April so it would be perfectly proper for them to return to a normal social life after that. I’m not sure that we can do so without raising eyebrows.’

His smile was rueful. ‘I rather think that horse has bolted, my darling. The fact that we married so suddenly barely two months after your mother’s death will be discussed at length by the *ton*.’

‘This is all too much for me today. My head’s spinning.’

‘You must rest and not worry about a thing. I can assure you that whatever you wish to happen, Adam and I will see that it’s done.’

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Richard left his wife to her hot chocolate and freshly baked morning rolls and returned to the sitting room where his brother was waiting. His conversation with Demelza hadn’t solved the problem – it had exacerbated it.

‘I’m sorry, Adam, Demelza has already decided to go into black and is quite right to insist that the family follow suit.’

‘Tarnation take it! This is a damnable business you’ve got us into.’

Richard rarely wanted to floor his brother but this angry comment made his fists clench.

‘I apologise unreservedly. You’re right to be angry with me for saying such a thing. You’ve behaved impeccably, far better than I would have done in the circumstances. Demelza will make you the perfect wife and I’m delighted to have her join the family. Eleanor will be pleased to have another wife to talk to and not a gaggle of giggling

debutantes.'

'I know what you're thinking, Adam. If I'd sent someone to Cornwall and not gone myself none of this would have happened.' He said this carefully, keeping his tone even, waiting to see what his brother's response would be. Depending on his answer they would be at daggers drawn or continue as close as any two siblings could be.

Only then did he realise that for the first time in their lives he was putting someone else's interests before Adam's. He also decided that Johnny and Silas would be his wards.

'If someone else had gone then the family would be the poorer for not having your lovely wife part of it. Don't scowl at me like that. Did you think I'd say anything disparaging about my new sister?'

'I didn't know what you'd say. I want those boys under my control, want them to be my responsibility not yours. I'll provide them with an income, set them on the right path. Which reminds me, Albert – that's Manson to you – suggested that I send them on a grand tour. Robinson, our senior secretary, could go with them as he speaks several languages. Albert's older and wiser and would keep the three of them on the straight and narrow. What do you think of the notion?'

'I think it an excellent one. I hope you don't expect me to call Manson by his first name.'

Richard chuckled. 'My wife and her brothers call him Uncle Albert and he's now an established member of our small family. Three months ago I was a single gentleman, no responsibilities, no prospect of setting up my nursery. Look at me now.'

'I do, and I envy you your happiness. You both profess that there's no love involved, but that's not what I see. I hope one day to find someone of my own who will make me equally content.'

## Chapter Thirteen

The long journey from Cornwall to Suffolk exhausted Demelza and by the time they arrived she was scarcely able to function normally. Richard carried her into her new abode but she noticed none of it. All she could think about was sinking into a comfortable bed of her own, in a warm room, and never having to get inside a carriage again.

She was roused regularly to drink beef broth or barley water, assisted from her bed to the commode, but she cared little for such things. All she wanted to do was sleep in peace.

Eventually she awoke with her head clear and her stomach rumbling.

‘At last, sweetheart, you’ve been sleeping for a week almost. Our doctor assured me this was your body’s way of restoring you and there was nothing to worry about but... but.’ He was unable to continue and she looked at him in surprise to see he was hastily wiping his eyes.

‘Oh, my dear, I’m so sorry to have worried you so badly. Can you ring for my maid? I’m going to have a bath, have my hair washed and then I need to eat something substantial.’

Jenny had obviously been within earshot as she appeared immediately. ‘Hot water will be sent up immediately, ma’am, and as soon as you’re ready your food will come.’

Richard’s face was thinner, his eyes shadowed but he was still immaculately dressed and she reached out and took his hand. ‘Thank you for staying with me, I couldn’t ask for a better husband. Your family must be in despair of meeting me.’

‘They’ve been anxious about your health, my love, and I’m going

at once to tell them that you're well again. We should never have travelled so soon after your first recovery.'

'I'm glad that we did. Although I've not looked around our new home, I already feel safe here. What of my brothers? How have they settled?'

His smile told her all she wanted to know. 'We can forget any notion of sending them to the continent for a year – they are now part of the family and both flirting outrageously with the girls and enjoying every moment of it.'

'They've never had the opportunity to mix with young ladies. I do hope they don't do anything they shouldn't.'

'Fear not, sweetheart, Leo has already taken them aside and explained how things must be. Everyone in the family is wearing a black armband and there's been no dancing or over exuberance. Do you still wish to have black gowns made up?'

She thought for a moment and then shook her head. 'No, a black armband will suffice. Now, leave me to my ablutions. Will you come back and see me when I send word that I'm ready to receive visitors?'

'You don't have to ask. I'm yours to command as you very well know.' He kissed her gently on her forehead and then strolled out and she watched him fondly. It took far longer than she'd anticipated to bathe, dry her hair and settle herself comfortably on the *chaise longue* which had been moved in front of the fire in the spacious sitting room that was part of her new accommodation.

'Can you ask my husband to join me, Jenny?'

'There's no need, ma'am, he's been pacing up and down the passageway this past half an hour.'

He must have heard them talking as the door flew open and he strode across the room his eyes bright. 'Good God, Demelza, I could have ridden to Ipswich and back in the time it's taken you to have a bath.'

She moved her legs and patted the space she'd created for him. 'I apologise for keeping you waiting, Richard, but I hope you'll agree it was worthwhile.' She batted her eyelids at him in what she hoped was an enticing way.



The reaction she got was instant and quite unexpected. One minute he was lounging beside her the next she was cradled on his lap. He kissed her with a thoroughness that left her breathless. Heaven knows what might have happened next if the rattle of crockery approaching hadn't warned them that they were about to be interrupted.

The sitting room door was opened by Jenny and then two footmen came in carrying laden trays. All thought of dalliance was forgotten. Her mouth watered at the appetising smells that were drifting towards them. She could hear them behind her setting the food out on the damask-covered table by the window.

Richard stood up with her still in his arms and carried her to the food. 'We shall eat together, my love, I've had no appetite whilst you've been so ill and now find myself ravenous.'

He served her himself, didn't overload her plate, but he filled it each time she finished what he'd given her. They washed down this delicious feast with coffee and Jenny had to fetch a second jug halfway through.

'That was the most delicious meal I've ever had. I'm not sure if it was breakfast, luncheon or dinner but I enjoyed every mouthful.'

He wiped his mouth with his napkin and sat back with a sigh of satisfaction. 'I echo your comments, my love. It's a little after two o'clock in the afternoon so I suppose it's either a very late luncheon or a very early dinner – but it's definitely not breakfast.'

He stood up and was about to move her chair obviously intending to carry her back to the daybed. She shook her head. 'No, I wish to walk. I need to get the strength back in my limbs if I'm ever to be fully fit again.'

Walking the short distance even with his arm around her waist was a major effort of will. She was glad to sink back onto the *chaise longue* and even happier that he resumed his place beside her.

They talked about the weather, the antics of the other members of the household until the servants had cleared away the debris and they were private again.

'Tell me, has there been any sign of my uncle wishing to make

trouble?’

‘Strangely, nothing at all. Adam has written to him informing him of your marriage and that your brothers are now part of this family too. He’s yet to receive a reply of any sort.’

‘I’ve been thinking, my dear, that as soon as I’m able to move about under my own volition I wish to explore my new household and meet your cousins.’

‘They are your cousins too. They are as eager to make your acquaintance as you are to make theirs. If you continue to improve then I see no reason why such a meeting can’t be arranged.’

‘I doubt that I’ll be strong enough to join them for dinner but would be happy to spend a morning with them. Remind me of their names, their ages and their characters.’

Three days later, after the doctor had visited and pronounced her well enough to go next door, she was eagerly anticipating finally meeting her relatives. Her brothers had come in every day and she was delighted to see they were happy and the wildness that she’d seen in Cornwall had been replaced by a maturity unexpected in boys so young.

When she’d discussed this with Richard he’d explained to her why they’d changed so much. ‘They thought they might lose you, sweetheart, and after the loss of your parents this would have been too much. It steadied them and made them re-evaluate their lives.’

‘I wish I hadn’t scared you all so badly. However, if my brush with death has changed my siblings for the better then it was worth it. Have they said what they intend to do with their lives?’

‘Silas wishes to become a doctor and is already spending time with our local physician learning as much as he can about the profession before he goes to university to study medicine.’

‘How splendid – and what about Johnny?’

‘He realises that he cannot in all conscience become a soldier as he is the only heir to Sir Hugo. Edward and Leo have taken him under their wing and are showing him how to run an estate efficiently.’

‘Then I can concentrate on getting well and eventually becoming a

true wife to you.'

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'I'll make sure the family are gathered in the drawing room this afternoon,' Richard said. 'The modiste is coming from Town with samples and fashion plates from the latest journals so they can set in motion their new wardrobes for the Season. I'm sure you wish to be included.'

'I should love to have some new gowns made, especially as I've always sewn my own. However, there's little point in doing so at the moment as my measurements are pitiful.'

'Then come and choose the materials and styles that you want and then the woman can return and take your measurements when you're ready.'

'That will be wonderful. Will you come and fetch me as I doubt that I'll find my way in such a large house?'

'I'll be back to eat luncheon with you and then we can go down together.'

He left confident Demelza was out of danger of a relapse. He used the communicating door which led from the east wing into the main part of the house and bumped into Estelle in the central hall. 'How is Demelza?'

'Awake and joining all of you later. Can I ask you to make sure everyone's there?'

'Do you think that's wise, Richard? She's been very ill, isolated before that, and meeting the entire family at the same time might well be overwhelming for her.'

'I hadn't thought of that. I'm just eager for you to make her acquaintance. I'm sure you'll love her as much as I do.'

He'd walked almost the entire distance to the study before the significance of his words registered. He all but fell into the room and Adam, who was perusing a pile of documents at the desk, looked up in surprise.

'I'm in love with my wife. I've only just realised – I don't know when it happened but it explains why I'm so damned protective of her.'

His brother smiled and returned to his work. 'The matter was never in any doubt as far as I was concerned. Unfortunately, I don't know Demelza well enough yet to ascertain if she reciprocates your feelings.'

'I don't care if she doesn't at the moment as I'm certain that, given time, she'll come to love me as I love her.'

'I've not time to discuss your personal life, Richard, we've got decisions to make about the fleet.'

They worked solidly for hours making vital decisions for their businesses and he forgot about his promise to join Demelza for luncheon and then escort her downstairs. He turned in his chair and looked at the clock.

'Devil take it! I've got to go – I'm already two hours late.'

He arrived at a run to her apartment to find it empty. Her maid heard him and appeared from the bedchamber. She curtsied politely. 'Mrs Somiton went down an hour ago, sir, Mr Manson escorted her.'

He cursed under his breath. Albert was supposed to be resting his broken ankle not using his crutches to hop all the way to the drawing room on the other side of the house. He slowed his pace as he approached the double doors and paused to scan the room. His beloved saw him at once and beckoned him. She didn't seem at all put out at his reprehensible behaviour although the other two ladies looked slightly disapproving at his tardy arrival.

'There you are, Richard, I'd quite given up hope of seeing you this afternoon.'

'Sweetheart, I apologise, I'd no idea it was so late.'

She'd saved a place for him beside her on the comfortable padded sofa and he flicked aside his coat-tails and sat beside her. Albert was deep in conversation with Leo and seemed none the worse for his excursion. Only Estelle and Leo's sister, Frances, were present.

'Did you also miss your luncheon? I'm sure we can send for something.'

'No, thank you, I can wait until dinner. Where's everybody else?'

Frances answered for her. 'Millie, Eloise and Jessica are in the dining room looking at pictures of the latest fashions and selecting

their materials. Mama, Demelza and I will go when they've finished.'

'What about Grace and the countess? Are they not to have new gowns?'

'They were adamant that they have enough as those they ordered last summer haven't been worn and fashions haven't changed significantly since then.'

He raised his eyebrows making all three of them laugh. 'I thought a lady could never have too many new gowns but I'm delighted to discover I made an erroneous assumption.'

He took little part in the conversation, was content to sit with his arm along the back of the seat, his fingers resting lightly on his wife's shoulder. After an hour she glanced at him and he saw at once that she'd had enough.

'Ladies, I'm taking my wife back to rest. Estelle, could you ask the modiste to leave her samples and so on? They won't be looked at today.'

He didn't ask Demelza's permission to pick her up. He just slid one arm beneath her knees and the other around her shoulders. He strode from the room holding her close.

'Thank you, I really don't have the energy to walk. How long is it going to take me to recover my strength? I hate being an invalid.'

'Three weeks ago I thought you were going to die. You can hardly expect to be well so soon. It might be weeks before you feel more the thing.'

'I intend to get up every day in future and spend an hour or two getting to know my new family. There's no rush, I suppose, as we have the rest of our lives ahead of us.'

'We do indeed, my love. I'll dine with you later as I failed to keep my appointment at midday.' He shouldered his way into her bedchamber and Jenny was there to turn back the covers. He put her gently on the edge of the bed and then left her maid to take care of matters.

The weather was clement and perfect for a gallop about the countryside. After spending several hours closeted in the study with his brother and then a further hour with the ladies, he needed the

fresh air.

Edward met him as he was heading for the side door which gave access to the path that led to the stables. 'I see you're dressed for riding. Would you care to accompany me to my home? You've not visited since we returned from our wedding trip and Eleanor will be pleased to see you.'

'I'd no particular destination in mind so will gladly come with you. How is she? Has the sickness abated?'

'Not completely but she's much better than she was. I'm still trying to get used to the idea of becoming a parent in the summer.' He smiled and nodded at him. 'No doubt you and Demelza will be setting up your nursery soon enough.'

'We remain apart until she's fully recovered, which could be months. I've been advised that she should avoid pregnancy for as long as possible.'

'I apologise for my remark. I spoke without thinking. Pregnancy can be fraught with danger for young ladies who are hale and hearty. Better to avoid it until next year.'

The thought that he'd not be able to make love to the woman he loved not just for months but possibly for far longer, was a daunting prospect. He smiled grimly as he mounted his stallion, Oscar, deciding that he'd not share a bed with her for as long as it took if by doing so he'd keep her safe from harm.

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Demelza slept for two hours and woke up refreshed. It seemed a waste of energy to get dressed again so she settled for her bedrobe over her voluminous white cotton nightgown.

'Do you wish me to put your hair up again, ma'am?'

'No, Jenny, leave it in its braid. I'm sure my husband won't care either way.' She smiled to herself as she thought she was using the word husband in her conversation as often as possible. Her eyes filled and she blinked back tears. Mama should have been there to see her wed.

Then something momentous occurred to her. If her mother hadn't passed away then she wouldn't be married to Richard. In fact, he'd

have returned here and she'd never have seen him again.

Had the hand of God been instrument in this hasty marriage? Had he taken her beloved parent to Paradise to be with Pa so that she could be with Richard? Thinking such thoughts was blasphemy as the Almighty had better things to do than bother himself with her family affairs.

'I won't need you again tonight, Jenny, as I'm already in my nightclothes. Spend the evening in the servants' hall next door getting to know the others.'

The girl blushed. 'I'm not interested in anyone next door, ma'am, I reckon Albert and I will have an understanding soon enough.'

'Good heavens, there's romance in the air. You have my full support – not that you need it – and I wish you well in your new relationship.'

She'd been about to add that Johnny was already besotted with Frances but realised such things shouldn't be discussed with one's maid. She would ask Richard what he thought about both these things when he arrived shortly.

The table by the window had been laid up with a crisp white cloth, silver cutlery had been set out and crystal glasses. With a handsome silver candelabrum as the centrepiece, each of the six beeswax candles sending their flickering golden light across the table, it looked quite enchanting and very intimate and romantic.

Her heart beat faster, for some reason she was finding it hard to catch her breath and for a horrible moment she believed that her illness might have returned. Then Richard strolled in and she finally understood that her unsteadiness was caused by her feelings for him.

'Should I have put on something else? You look so smart and I'm still in my nightwear.'

His eyes blazed. 'You look perfect as you are. I'm sharp-set as I failed to eat much breakfast and missed my luncheon. I hope they won't be long bringing our dinner to us.'

They remained by the fire until there was a tap on the door and he went over to open it. Two footmen staggered in and a third followed. She watched with interest as this young man removed the platters

from the trays and set them out where they could be reached with ease.

The jug of claret was placed by Richard's chair and a jug of something else by hers. They stood in a row waiting to be told if they should remain to help serve or if they weren't needed. Richard flicked his hand and the trio left as quietly as they'd come.

He held out his hand and she took it. He led her to the table, pulled out the chair for her, lifted both her and the chair and placed it closer.

'This looks and smells quite delicious. Shall I serve you or will you help yourself?'

She scarcely knew what she ate but it was all tasty. She drank an entire jug of freshly squeezed lemonade and marvelled at the fact that such an exotic fruit was available in the middle of winter.

'I am replete. I couldn't eat another morsel. Do you think that they'll bring us coffee later?'

'I'll ask them when they come to collect the debris.'

Again he came behind her chair and moved her out from the table. He then put his hands under her elbows and assisted her to her feet.

'I cannot tell you when I've enjoyed a dinner as much as this one, my dear Richard. I'd no thought of being married to anyone a few months ago and yet here we are.'

She was standing rather close to him, he still had a light grasp of her elbows.

'Do you have any regrets?'

'Regrets? I bitterly regret that my parents weren't there to see us married but apart from that I'm very happy with my lot. I find that so far I'm enjoying being your wife.' She smiled up at him. 'Although that might change as I get to know you better.'

His bark of laughter filled the room and defused the tension between them. 'Come and sit down by the fire, sweetheart, and we can talk until the coffee comes.'



## Chapter Fourteen

Richard was delighted with Demelza's progress and two weeks after their arrival she was robust enough not to require an afternoon rest. Today, for the first time, she was to join the family for dinner next door.

He waited impatiently in her sitting room for her to emerge in her evening gown. Everybody would be there tonight including Albert and Robinson, plus the two junior secretaries. The bedchamber door opened and he caught his breath.

Standing before him was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Her magnificent russet hair was arranged so that tendrils framed her face. Her beautiful blue eyes sparkled with health. The gown was gold, cut to fit her perfectly and needed no further embellishments.

'Don't stand there with your mouth open, Richard, tell me if you like my new gown.'

'It's *ravissante* and so are you. How did you acquire a new gown so soon?'

She turned slowly allowing him to see a glimpse of her matching golden slippers and neat ankles in embroidered stockings. 'Jenny and I made it. The modiste left sufficient silk amongst her samples for us to do so. I've sent my measurements to her and I'm hoping to have a replenished wardrobe in a few weeks.'

Black armbands weren't worn indoors so there was nothing to mar the beauty of her ensemble. He offered his arm and she slipped her hand through it. They were halfway down the stairs when she spoke again.

‘Did you know that Albert and Jenny are courting? I said she had my full support but it’s getting awkward. He’s included in these gatherings whilst she remains firmly on the other side of the divide. That must be so hard for both of them. What happens if they wish to marry?’

‘Adam and I have been talking about that very eventuality. There’s a decent house in the village become vacant and he’s to move there as soon as it’s refurbished and furnished. What worked very well when you were unmarried isn’t really suitable now. I can assure you he’s eager to resume his position as an employee.’

‘Does that mean I can keep Jenny as my dresser if they do get married in the summer?’

‘I don’t see why not. They can travel to work together. It’s no more than a mile – no distance at all on foot.’

‘Does that mean Albert must become Manson again and no longer be included as he is tonight? I’ve become very fond of him and so have my brothers.’

‘He will attend more formal events like tonight as the secretaries do but not come to family gatherings.’

She shivered and moved closer to him. ‘That gown is too flimsy for the weather. You should have worn your cloak – the passages in this mausoleum of a place are freezing.’

‘It will be warmer in the main reception rooms. Gentlemen have the advantage in the winter but we have it in the summer.’

The sound of merry laughter and chatter drifted from the open doors of the drawing room. It hadn’t been his intention to arrive last and make a grand entrance but so be it. He deliberately paused allowing those assembled to see his beloved wife in her golden gown looking like a princess.

She giggled and nudged him with her elbow. ‘No one is looking in our direction, and I so wished my beautiful gown to make an impression on them.’

‘Baggage – you were deliberately late. Let’s not dither about out here but get into the warmth so you can stop shivering.’

‘It’s excitement that makes me tremble, not the cold. This is the

first time I've been part of an occasion like this. We never entertained at Seaview. I can't believe how relaxed and sophisticated Johnny and Silas look.'

He was about to answer when her fingers dug into his arm.

'They don't own evening clothes. I can't believe that these were made for them so quickly.'

'They weren't, sweetheart, Silas is wearing a borrowed ensemble from Leo and Johnny has on something of mine that I wore when I was his age.'

Finally, their arrival was observed by Adam who strode across and embraced Demelza. 'I can't tell you how happy I am to have you here. I'm not sure I should risk paying you a compliment as your husband's scowling at me.'

She curtsied. 'I'm delighted that I'm well enough to come, my lord.'

Adam understood immediately that she was playing a part. He bowed, and took her hand and raised it to his lips. 'Welcome, Mrs Somiton, I hope to see you here most evenings in future.'

His brother winked at him making it clear he wasn't seriously flirting with her. He shouldn't be jealous but he found it difficult to mask his feelings of displeasure.

'Don't look so curmudgeonly, my love, you know I've eyes for no one but my husband.'

His flash of anger melted under her smile. This was the first time she'd addressed him in this way and to do so in public gave him hope that she would one day reciprocate his feelings.

Dinner was sumptuous with a dozen removes and several courses. When the ladies retired, led tonight by Demelza as, by being his wife, she took precedence over everyone else. This would remain the case until Adam stepped into parson's mousetrap.

He was impatient to join them and refused the port as it passed by on the table in its small silver trolley. No one had overindulged this evening and the conversation was sensible and intelligent.

'I think it strange that Sir Hugo hasn't replied to your letter, sir,' Johnny said to Adam.

‘As do I. I thought to send someone down in person to see why there’s been no answer. Robinson, would you be prepared to go? If you travel by mail coach it will be uncomfortable, but you should do it in a couple of days. I’ll give you a second letter and you must wait for a reply.’

Edward wasn’t impressed by this suggestion. ‘Adam, that means my senior secretary, my second-in-command, will be absent from his desk for almost a sennight. We have those new contracts to write and deliver.’

‘Let me go, my lord,’ Albert said. ‘It won’t involve that much walking and I can manage very well with a stick. The doctor said the ankle’s healed. I know the area and the man.’

‘Then by all means, you go instead. I’ll write the letter tonight so you can set off first thing in the morning. Your new accommodation will be ready for you on your return so make sure all your belongings are packed and then they can be transferred in your absence.’

The matter was decided and his former valet looked delighted at being able to do something useful. Richard pushed his chair back regardless of the fact that his brother should have been the one to lead the gentlemen through.

‘Excuse me, I’ve dallied here long enough. I’m going to join the ladies – or I should say I’m going to join my wife as, fond as I am of the others, I don’t give a fig for their company at the moment.’

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Demelza didn’t want to sit with the unmarried girls although they were her age and neither did she wish to sit with Mrs Somiton or the countess. Mrs Revere – Lady Eleanor Revere that should be – obviously felt the same.

‘I’m so glad that you’re now well enough to join us. We’re the bridge between the matrons and the unmarried girls and have much in common. I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see Richard so happy.’

‘I do hope he’s as content with the arrangement as I. To think that if someone at the bank hadn’t stolen our money we’d never have met. Now I cannot imagine my life without him at my side.’

‘I hope that you’re able to start your family soon so our babies can

grow up together.'

'We sleep apart at the moment as it's inadvisable for me to be increasing so soon after my almost fatal illness.' She leaned forward confidently. 'I cannot wait to be his true wife and am prepared to take the chance but he will not. Is there any way, do you know, that I could share my bed with him without immediately becoming pregnant?'

'I've no idea, Demelza, I got married in September and this baby is due in June so you can do the sums for yourself. My mother told me the only way to avoid a baby is to avoid one's husband.'

'Not every family has a dozen children. You only have one sister, do you not?'

'I've no idea why there were no further babies but it wasn't for lack of trying. Papa was desperate for an heir but it wasn't to be.'

'I wish I knew more about such things. I've seen animals mating so understand the mechanics but my mother never spoke of intimate matters with me.'

'Neither did mine. I promise you that when Richard comes to you, he'll know exactly what to do. We have to remain ignorant, innocent, but a gentleman does not.'

'Does he keep a mistress somewhere? I do hope not – however acceptable that might be in some circles I'd never be comfortable with my husband behaving in that way.'

'I've not heard mention of anyone. I don't suggest that you ask him about it either. It's not the sort of subject a new bride should discuss with her husband.'

Demelza stared at her in astonishment. 'Fiddlesticks to that! It's exactly the sort of thing a new wife should ask. Are you saying that if Edward has a mistress you wouldn't object or even quiz him on the subject?'

Eleanor laughed out loud. 'He'd be unwise to play me false as he'd not survive my discovering his perfidy.'

They were both laughing at this highly indelicate conversation when Richard and Edward strode in and headed in their direction.

'Do you mind if we join you, sweetheart? I thought we could play

a hand or two of Whist.'

'How dull that sounds, Richard. I'd much rather sit and talk. Eleanor and I have been having a most interesting and enlightening conversation.'

'Then converse we shall. There's nothing I like better than discussing the latest crim con from Town or the current position of the waistline on a gown.' He tried to look serious but his eyes were twinkling.

'I've no idea what crim con is, I've no interest in the latest fashions, so perhaps we'd better stick to cards after all.'

Edward smiled lovingly at his wife, touched her lightly on the shoulder and then shook his head. 'I'll play for you, Demelza, that way nobody will have to talk or play cards.'

He strolled off and moments later all conversation stopped and the entire party was entranced by the beautiful music. She'd never heard anything like this before. Usually, it would be the ladies who played after dinner but she doubted any of them were as proficient on the keys as he was.

When his impromptu recital was concluded to a round of hearty applause, she touched Richard's arm. That was all that was needed for him to understand she was ready to retire. He stood up and offered his hand.

'There's no need for us to explain why we're leaving. We'll slip away and leave the others to enjoy the remainder of the evening.'

She nodded her farewells to Eleanor, who she now considered a firm friend, and slipped her hand through his arm. As soon as they were in the corridor he shrugged out of his coat and put it around her shoulders. His warmth remained within the material and she was touched by his gesture.

He kept his arm around her waist and together they hurried down the long, icy passageways, through the communicating door and into their own home. It was equally cold on this side of the building.

When they reached the stairs he swung her up into his arms and ran to the top as if she weighed no more than a bag of feathers. He shouldered his way into her bedchamber, which was deliciously

warm, and put her down.

‘Will you stay and talk to me? There are things I wish to say to you. You must concentrate on your business affairs during the day and I have no wish to interfere with that.’

‘Shall we go into your sitting room?’ He didn’t wait for her reply but lifted his jacket from her shoulders and walked ahead of her.

‘I won’t be a moment. I’m going to remove my gown and get into something warmer and more comfortable. Why don’t you do the same?’

He didn’t come in but replied from the other side of the door. ‘I’ll do that. I’ll also send for coffee, or would you prefer chocolate?’

‘Coffee would be wonderful.’

Her gown ought to be easy to remove as it had no buttons or fastenings but dropped over her head being of the modern style with a high waistline. Getting into it had been far simpler than getting out without the assistance of her maid. Eventually she achieved her objective. The beautiful gown was draped over the wooden stand in her dressing room and her petticoats were dropped into the laundry basket.

He returned before she was ready and she could hear him moving about next door. An impulse made her decide to remove the pins from her hair and let it fall loose around her shoulders. After all, he was her husband and had yet to see it this way.

Her heart was thudding, her knees strangely weak and she thought it nothing to do with her health. She took a steadying breath and walked into her sitting room as if it was the most normal thing in the world to be in her nightclothes with her hair down.

Until she saw him she hadn’t quite understood that he’d be similarly attired. The strong column of his throat was visible, the white of his nightgown framed it wonderfully.

They stared at each other, wide-eyed and appreciative. He moved first – not like a predator but softly, staring at her as if he’d never seen her before.

‘May I touch your hair, darling girl?’

She nodded unable to reply with words. He was so close. Only an

inch or two separated them. Tentatively he reached out and then there was a faint tug and his fingers were entangled in her curls. Her head spun and she couldn't prevent herself from closing the distance between them.

\*

It took all Richard's iron control not to pick her up and carry her to the bedroom. He held her close, revelling in these precious moments, loving her softness pressed against him.

His hands were embedded in her hair. It was as thick, as lustrous and as soft as he'd dreamt it would be. He tilted her head and kissed her. Her lips parted beneath his and she responded to his touch in a way that sent him wild.

Somehow he managed to raise his head. 'No, my darling, we cannot continue this. You're not strong enough to risk a pregnancy.'

Instead of agreeing, of moving out of his arms, she pressed closer. 'That's my decision, my love, and I'm prepared to take the risk. I intend to be your true wife – to wake up every morning in your arms.'

He wanted to make love to her, to show her how much he loved her but not at the expense of her life. She was making it impossible for him to step away. He wasn't made of ice and had never felt such desire for any other woman before.

The moment was interrupted by the sound of someone running towards them. They broke apart and turned towards the door.

'Richard, you must come downstairs at once.' It was Johnny outside.

In two strides he was at the door and all but dragged the young man in. 'I can't go down as I am. What the devil's going on that requires my immediate attention?'

'Sir Hugo has turned up with three lawyers and at least six armed retainers.'

'I have to get dressed. Johnny, tell Adam I'll be down in ten minutes.'

Demelza was already at her bedchamber door. 'I'm coming too. Johnny, stay outside and tell me exactly what's happening. Richard, don't go down without me.'



Her husband nodded and hurtled from the room. His accommodation was at the far end of the passageway which gave her a few precious minutes extra.

She snatched up her discarded petticoats and pulled them on and then found a warm, velvet gown and stepped into it. Her brother was silent and she called his name again. There was no response and she thought he must have followed Richard and not remained to speak to her.

There wasn't time to put her hair up so she quickly plaited it and tied a ribbon around the end and left it dangling down her back. Everyone would know what they'd been doing but she didn't care – they were married and could do as they pleased in the privacy of their own chambers.

Thank the good Lord that they weren't actually in bed together when her brother had arrived – as that would have been decidedly embarrassing.

She was ready not a moment too soon as Richard appeared more or less dressed. 'You have no stock or waistcoat on, my love.'

His smile sent heatwaves spiralling up and down her body. 'And you have your hair in disarray. Whatever that obnoxious man demands, I can assure you that I'll spend tonight beside you.'

As they ran hand in hand through the icy passageways, she demanded to know what Johnny had said. 'It's almost ten o'clock. What maggot has got into Sir Hugo's brain for him to arrive at such a time?'

'Heaven knows, but I can assure you that whatever he thinks, whatever his lawyers say, he'll not leave here with you or your brothers.'

'Are they actually inside?'

'They are contained in the entrance hall. We've dozens of inside men and all of them are now guarding the party to ensure they go no further. They'll be ejected as soon as I've spoken to him.'

## Chapter Fifteen

Richard led Demelza into the drawing room through the side door so they didn't have to go anywhere near the corralled, unwanted visitors. The ladies were gathered at the far end of the room, the gentlemen, including Johnny and Silas, were standing together a few yards from the closed double doors that led directly into the entrance hall. Three sturdy footmen were leaning against the door preventing it from being opened from the other side.

'Adam, what the hell's going on? How are these people inside and, from what Johnny said, carrying weapons?'

'One of the footmen answered the door and they barged in sending him sprawling on the tiles. He managed to raise the alarm before they could get any further.'

'My god, I hope he wasn't hurt.'

'No, bruised but nothing broken. You'll notice that I've had the gunroom opened. Leo has his sabre. Robinson is also a competent swordsman; the boys have muskets and the rest of us have pistols. I pray they won't be necessary, that this can be resolved by diplomacy, not violence.'

'Sweetheart, I think you'd better join the ladies. I don't want you in any danger.'

'No, my brothers and I need to speak to him. He's not a stupid man and I'm sure once he realises how things are here, he'll not try and force the issue.' She looked inquiringly at Adam. 'What exactly has he said since he arrived?'

'He said nothing. One of the black crows accompanying him did

all the talking. They said they had a legal document stating that all three of you were being held here illegally. That we are kidnappers and subject to immediate arrest, incarceration and the death penalty.'

Richard was shocked by this, but his indomitable young wife laughed and exchanged smiles with her brothers. 'I am married so that removes me from the equation. I believe that you already have the papers in hand that make Johnny and Silas Richard's wards. I cannot believe you've not already shown him these.'

'Devil take it! Demelza's quite correct to take us to task. Robinson, you know where the documents are in the study. Can you fetch them for us?' Richard was finally able to breathe easily. It wasn't like his brother to misjudge the situation.

'I have my marriage lines with me.'

'Good girl. I must talk to Adam for a moment and I think it would be wise for you and your brothers to decide exactly what you want to say.'

He could see that his brother wished to speak to him in private and they moved to one side out of earshot from the rest.

'There's something more you haven't told me.'

'You're forgetting the most crucial point. They have six men armed with pistols. I don't think producing legal documents of any sort is going to prevent them trying to take Demelza, Johnny and Silas from us.'

'How do you want to do this? I'm certain they don't wish to fire their weapons, but I fear Sir Hugo is slightly deranged and might order them to if he doesn't get his own way. Listen to him ranting out there. We need to get the ladies to safety and I'm not comfortable having the youngsters here either.'

Adam nodded. 'They can slip out the way you came in and gather in your side of the house. If they lock the communicating door then they'll be safe.'

He realised then that there were two people missing. 'Did Edward take Eleanor home?'

'Yes, they left an hour ago, not long after you and Demelza went up.'

Leo strode over, every inch a military man. ‘Will you allow me to take charge of this incursion?’

‘What do you suggest?’ Adam said cautiously.

‘Let Demelza and the boys distract them. Manson can accompany them into the hall. Then we’ll approach from the rear and the left flank. The front door remains unlocked and Robinson and I will enter that way. The two standing with their backs to it won’t have time to fire their weapons and, with our swords at their throats, they’ll surrender.

‘I suggest that you and Richard approach through the servants’ passageway. Again, they have their backs to you and it will be easy work to overcome them.’

‘That just leaves the two guarding the drawing room. Presumably when the doors open, they might well try to charge in and we need to avoid that.’ Richard wasn’t happy with this arrangement as he had no wish for his wife to be involved in any way at all.

‘Manson, Demelza and the boys will approach down the central passageway. The two men will be facing them and all their attention will be that way. Your footmen must immediately stand aside in case any of the guns are fired.’

This left the two secretaries who looked remarkably calm and efficient holding their loaded and primed weapons.

‘That just leaves the two guarding this door,’ Adam said.

‘If Demelza and her brothers make enough noise as they approach then that will distract those two.’ Leo gestured towards the secretaries. ‘You must burst through at exactly the same time as the rest of us. Knock them down with the butt of your guns – for God’s sake don’t fire them unless absolutely necessary.’

Richard didn’t want Demelza and the boys involved at all but understood this plan would only work if they were. He beckoned the three of them over and explained what was wanted. They nodded and appeared remarkably unbothered by this calamity.

‘Demelza, don’t put yourself in any danger. When we burst in run back here. Johnny, Silas, leave your shotguns here. Leo doesn’t want you going out there armed.’

Sir Hugo was now shouting that he intended to employ force if he didn't get his way. Leo came across and smiled at the siblings.

'Walk slowly, it will take us a few minutes to get in place. Seem hesitant, demand answers, wave your papers at him, get their attention focused on the passageway.'

'Take care, darling girl, don't take any risks.' She stepped willingly into his arms and he kissed her trying to show her how much he loved her without actually using the words.

The group disbanded rapidly. The three of them had been told to emerge from the drawing room into the passageway exactly two minutes after the rest of them had gone. This meant he couldn't hear what was happening and just had to pray things went as Leo intended.

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With her brothers flanking her and Uncle Albert ahead Demelza walked out of the drawing room into the freezing passageway.

'We're coming out. Sir Hugo, there's no need for violence,' Johnny yelled.

The three footmen divided, two went to the left and one to the right so the armed men facing the corridor could see them.

'You have come on a wasted journey, Sir Hugo, I have my marriage certificate here,' she shouted her voice echoing in the empty space ahead of her.

'We have papers proving that Richard Somiton is now our legal guardian,' Silas called.

They were walking slowly, in no hurry to emerge into the hall too soon. The armed men moved forward keeping their pistols firmly pointed at the three of them. Albert still walked in front; her brothers were on either side of her. She was as protected as she could be in the circumstances.

When they arrived at the entrance to the hall Sir Hugo, with his three lawyers at his side, surged forward.

'Show me, show me these papers. They are worth nothing. You married without my consent so I'll have it set aside. Somiton cannot take my wards away if he's not married to you. You will leave here with me tonight willingly or I'll take you by force.'

Richard had been right to say that their uncle was deranged. His eyes had a manic gleam, he was waving his arms around and barely able to form a coherent sentence so angry was he. He hadn't known of their existence a few months ago so it made no sense that he was so determined to drag the three of them away. Only a lunatic would believe that a husband would hand over his wife however great the threat.

There was still no sign of the imminent attack. She exchanged a nervous glance with her brothers. They had to delay things for a few more minutes because if they allowed themselves to be taken it would be too late. Richard wouldn't risk them being injured and would have to let them go and then heaven knows what would happen.

'I'm of no use to you, Sir Hugo, my marriage is a true one. No court in the country is going to set it aside whatever your views on the matter.'

He rushed at her and she couldn't hold back her scream of shock. Johnny and Silas stepped in front of her. Four of the armed men followed their employer.

The front door smashed back at exactly the same moment Richard and Adam hurtled through the servants' entrance. Their sudden appearance was sufficient to allow them to disarm the two approaching her brothers and herself.

Leo and Robinson pounced on two of the men and as soon as they saw the swords they surrendered. The two young men erupted from drawing room and, holding their guns by the barrels, knocked those standing in front of it unconscious.

It was over in seconds. The lawyers ran for the open door leaving Sir Hugo isolated in the centre of the hall. One might have expected him to collapse, to follow his legal team from the house, but he continued to shout and demand that he was given what was his.

Leo was in control and soon had all six men securely tied. The footmen were only too happy to carry the men from the house and dispose of them somewhere. Robinson and the two secretaries accompanied Leo and the prisoners from the house. She wasn't sure where Albert went but he didn't return.

She flew into Richard's arms and he held her tight. Then with his arm still around her waist he shook hands with each of her brothers.

'Sweetheart, all of you return to the drawing room and leave Adam and I to conclude this.'

'I think he's lost his faculties. I doubt that you'll reason with him.'

'I vow that he'll never bother us again. I doubt this will take very long.'

Her teeth were chattering and she wasn't sure if it was terror or cold that was causing this. Once in the safety of the drawing room she headed for the fire. Silas followed her but Johnny didn't.

'He's gone to fetch the other ladies now it's safe. I don't understand why that man wanted us. We might be related to him but we bring no huge inheritance or prestige. It's a mystery to me,' Silas said.

'And to me. I doubt that any footmen are available even if you ring. Could you go to the kitchens and arrange for sustenance to be fetched? I think that hot spiced wine, sandwiches and plum cake would be perfect.'

'I'll also ask for coffee, tea and brandy to be included. Did you know that Johnny is serious about his intentions towards Frances? I told him the two of them are far too young to become involved but it's too late.'

'They're both under age – unless they elope I can assure you that neither Richard nor Adam will give permission for them to become betrothed until they're considerably older.'

The sound of voices approaching warned her that the ladies were approaching. The refreshments arrived at the same time as the gentlemen returned. There was an air of celebration in the room, much congratulatory slapping of backs and shaking of hands, very much in the way that soldiers might behave after winning a battle.

No one refused the hot, sweet spiced wine and after two servings she was light-headed and giggly. The other girls were in no better case. She still didn't know what had become of Sir Hugo – she couldn't think of him as her uncle – and must contain her curiosity until she and Richard were alone.

Eloise brought her a cup of coffee and handed it to her with a smile. 'Try this, Demelza, it's what the gentlemen are drinking and it's quite delicious.'

It tasted strange but she drank it anyway. Then her world tilted somewhat and her eyes blurred.

'How much have you imbibed, sweetheart? You're as drunk as a wheelbarrow. Up you come, time for you to retire and sleep it off.' Richard scooped her up and she settled back into his arms.

She woke the next morning with the most horrible headache and could scarcely lift her head from the pillow. Richard wasn't beside her which was fortunate as she only just scrambled to the commode before she cast up her accounts.

She staggered back to bed feeling very unwell and sorry for herself. Where was Jenny? Why wasn't she here to take care of her?

'Here, Demelza, drink this, it will settle your stomach and help with your headache,' Richard had wandered in apparently not bothered about her imminent demise.

'I'm very ill. I've had a relapse.'

'No, my girl, you drank too much and are suffering from the after-effects. It serves you right. You should never have had coffee laced with brandy on top of the mulled wine.'

She drank the potion she was offered and grimaced. 'That was extremely unpleasant. I didn't know the coffee had brandy in it or I wouldn't have drunk it. It did taste rather odd.'

He laughed and dropped onto the bed and stretched out. 'Little idiot, you've much to learn. That said, you weren't the only one so afflicted. Adam had more difficulty getting the girls to bed than we had overcoming six armed men last night.'

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'Are they still incarcerated or did Adam let them go?'

Richard took her hand before answering. 'Edward saw them arriving as he was leaving and sent for the militia. Leo knew the officer in charge and all of them were taken to Ipswich and locked up in the local jail.'



‘I don’t like to think of an elderly gentleman spending the night in such unpleasant circumstances. What will they be charged with?’

‘Attempted murder and abduction. Don’t look so worried, sweetheart, the lawyers and your uncle will be released after a few days under the proviso that they refrain from interfering in our lives ever again.’

She sat up and swung her legs to the floor. ‘I take it that from what you’re not telling me the paid men will suffer much harsher penalties? That’s decidedly unfair.’

‘They knew what they were doing as did your uncle. They must accept the consequences of their actions.’

‘Sir Hugo, we both agreed, is mentally unwell and should be taken care of and not thrown into prison.’

He supposed that she did have a valid point but he wasn’t prepared to discuss it right now. Instead, he reached out, put his arm around her waist and pulled her back onto the bed.

Instead of settling down beside him as he’d expected she wriggled free. ‘If you think that I’m going to resume what we started last night, then you’re under a misapprehension. Don’t you have your own bed to sleep in?’

He was no longer amused. He regained his feet and stared thoughtfully down at her. ‘I’m not sure what I’ve done to anger you, Demelza, and I’m too damned tired to find out.’

He left her and returned to his own apartment. Time enough to discover why she’d been so incensed when she should have been relieved that her problems were over and she and her brothers were now safe.

His new valet was efficient, but would never be more than a servant, unlike Manson. He tumbled into bed and fell asleep immediately.

After a leisurely hour spent on his ablutions, being shaved and attired for the day, he headed downstairs in search of sustenance. Luncheon would have been over an hour ago but he was sure there would be something in the kitchen he could eat.

The house was strangely quiet – obviously his wife and the boys were next door. Manson – he'd insisted that he no longer be called Albert – was moving to his new home in the village today. His wish to eat became secondary to his desire to know where Demelza was as she hadn't been in her apartment when he'd looked in a few minutes ago.

The main part of the house was also eerily quiet. He assumed the girls were still suffering from their overindulgence last night but that didn't explain why Leo, Johnny, Silas and his wife were missing. Adam, he assumed, was in the study as usual.

He headed in that direction and found both Leo and his brother sprawled in front of the fire drinking coffee.

'Good morning, you two, I'm looking for Demelza and the boys. Do you know where they are?'

'I've not seen them today. However, I saw the carriage go out an hour or so ago so it's possible they were in it,' Leo told him.

'Adam, where did they say they were going when they asked permission to use your carriage?'

'They didn't ask. Demelza's your wife and therefore is free to come and go as she pleases. I expect the head groom will know.'

Neither of them seemed worried by this mysterious absence so perhaps he was overreacting. He waved his hand in thanks and strode off to the stable yard.

'Yes, sir, they went to Ipswich. Said they wouldn't be back until dark.'

'Have my horse saddled. I'll be back in five minutes.'

He took the stairs at the double and had his riding coat on, and his gloves, whip and hat in his hands and was back downstairs within the allotted time. Demelza and the boys had gone to Ipswich in order to intervene and attempt to have Sir Hugo and his henchmen set free. God knows what difficulties they would get into.

His massive stallion travelled the distance to Ipswich at a ground covering canter and he reached the outskirts in a little over half an hour. He reined back and let Oscar walk so he would be cool when he arrived at the courthouse where the prisoners would be kept.

There were stables at the rear of the building and he dismounted

and tossed the reins to a waiting ostler. He didn't have to enquire after his missing wife and her brothers as the Somiton carriage was standing at the far side of the space and the team were happily munching hay in the barn into which his own stallion was taken.

He removed his riding coat, tucked his gloves and whip into his beaver, and draped it over the edge of the stall where Oscar was about to be stabled. With a corner of his coat he wiped his boots clean.

There was a side door available for those coming from the stables but he decided to walk around the building and enter through the front. His intention was to make an impression – every inch a wealthy and powerful gentleman.

He stalked up to the black-garbed clerk who was hunched over his lectern scribbling. 'I'm Somiton. Mrs Somiton and my wards are here. Take me to them now.'

## Chapter Sixteen

Richard knew that referring to himself as Somiton would make the listener believe that he was Adam – the Earl of Somiton – and, as they were identical, he doubted anyone would question him. He hadn't lied, just bent the truth a little.

His barked command had the desired effect and the unfortunate man tangled his feet in the legs of his stool in his effort to respond.

'They are with the Chief Magistrate of the court, Sir Roland Preston. They have been with him a considerable time.'

Richard hid his smile. He was certain the unfortunate Sir Roland would be more than happy to relinquish the three of them into his charge.

The clerk scurried along in front of him, down a long passageway, past another corridor which must lead to the outside as a blast of cold air lifted his hair as they walked past. The clerk paused in front of a closed door. He was raising his hand to knock when it flew open and Demelza burst out and collided with him. The result was inevitable. The poor man fell flat on his back and Demelza joined him on the floor.

She stared up at him in astonishment. 'Richard, what are you doing here?'

He leaned down, took her hands and lifted her to her feet and then did the same for the clerk. The racket had attracted the attention of those still inside the room and an irate gentleman with a bald pate and portly figure appeared in the open doorway accompanied by two grim-faced constables.

‘What the devil’s going on out here? As you have hold of her for me, sir, you can return that woman to me. She can join her brothers in the cells.’

All desire to laugh left him. He drew Demelza close. Her face was tear-streaked, her eyes clouded with misery.

Keeping his arm around her he stepped into the room and carefully seated her on a convenient chair. Then he turned and fixed the full force of his fury on the person who’d dared to upset his beloved wife and incarcerate the boys.

‘You dared to lay hands on members of my family? Do you know who I am?’

‘I cannot say that I do. That woman...’

‘If you refer to my sister-in-law in such terms again then I’ll not be answerable for my actions. I’m the Earl of Somiton. You will release my wards immediately. Do I make myself quite clear?’

Demelza understood immediately that only by impersonating his brother could he rectify this situation. ‘My lord, that man had Johnny and Silas arrested, but not because they insisted that Sir Hugo should be released immediately. We told him that no charges were being laid against him and that he was of unsound mind, not a villain.’

Richard glanced over his shoulder, nodded, then turned to face this person who was going to rue the day he’d crossed paths with the Somiton family.

‘I came to expedite the release of Sir Hugo Trenwith and his lawyers. I don’t give a damn what happens to the armed men he brought with him. Instead, I find you have taken it upon yourself to imprison my wards.’ He snapped his fingers at the terrified clerk who was pressed against the wall watching the drama unfold. The two henchmen now looked more nervous than fierce.

‘You, go to the turnkey immediately and do as I command.’

‘No, remain where you are, Simpkins. I’ll not be dictated to by anybody in my own office. You might be the Earl of Somiton but I am chief magistrate here and my word is law.’

Richard was tempted to pick the man up and shake him until his teeth rattled but restrained himself. It was doubtful the other two

would intervene. They were already sidling towards the exit.

‘I don’t give a damn who you are. The militia brought in Sir Hugo and his entourage last night after he attempted to remove Mrs Somiton and my wards. I’ve had time to consider the situation and have decided not to bring charges. Therefore, as I just told you, you will release them at once.’

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Demelza had prayed that Richard would discover her absence, realise where she might be, and come after her and rectify this nightmare. Masquerading as his brother was the perfect thing to do – an earl had more power than a commoner and nobody but herself and Adam would know the difference.

Everything had been going splendidly until Sir Roland decided she was a lady of loose morals – his assumption had been made because she was here in his office without the protection of her husband.

He’d suggested that if she was obliging to him then he would release Sir Hugo and the lawyers immediately. If she wasn’t then, as far as he was concerned, they could remain where they were.

Her brothers, quite naturally, had taken immediate exception to his lewd remarks. If only they’d kept their actions to stern words then they wouldn’t have been dragged away like felons by the constables.

Richard was already incandescent – should she tell him why the boys were locked up and risk him physically attacking the magistrate? She thought that having spoken to her so disrespectfully would put Sir Roland in the wrong.

‘My lord, excuse me for interrupting. I need to tell you why my brothers are in a cell.’ By the time she’d finished her explanation she regretted having spoken. Her husband no longer resembled the man she’d fallen in love with. He appeared to grow several inches, his eyes were like flints and his expression was murderous.

He turned and spoke very slowly and apparently calmly. This was more terrifying than if he’d raged. ‘I could snap your neck with one hand, but you’re not worth the effort. By the time I’ve finished with you you’ll have no friends, no status, and ample time to regret your disrespect.’

The clerk didn't wait to be told but ran from the room closely followed by those that had removed her brothers. Richard's hands were clenched, he was barely holding his temper in check.

'Sir Hugo's carriage is somewhere about. Is he to return to Cornwall or do you think we should take him back with us and take care of him until he's recovered his senses?'

'Whatever you want to do, my dear. We've spent more than enough time in this place. Allow me to escort you outside.'

Sir Roland who'd been belligerent and loud on his arrival made not a sound as they left. She almost felt sorry for him because if Richard said he intended to destroy the man's life then she was certain he would do so. Better that than doing him physical harm which was what her brothers had attempted.

The only difficulty with him pretending to be Adam was that she couldn't throw herself into his arms as she wanted to. She'd only just realised that she loved him and she couldn't wait to tell him her feelings. It didn't matter if he didn't reciprocate them – he would treat her no differently because he was the most wonderful man in the world and she was the luckiest girl to be married to him.

Her brothers were already in the stable yard arranging for the carriage to be made ready. There was no sign of either the horses or the carriage that belonged to their uncle. Before they could greet Richard she quickly stepped in.

'His lordship arranged for you to be released. It's fortuitous that he arrived when he did.'

'My lord, that was a lark. We were bundled out of the magistrate's office but had yet to be locked into a cell,' Silas said as he backed one of the team into the traces.

'I'll leave you to take care of your sister. The three of you must leave immediately and I'll catch you up on the road. I must ensure Sir Hugo and his minions are also released. Where the hell are his horses and his carriage? They should be here.'

'There's a livery yard close by and I heard one of the grooms say that the carriage and team have been taken there. This yard is only for visitors.'

‘I’ll go there and have them prepare the carriage for Sir Hugo. I hope his trunks haven’t been pilfered,’ Johnny said with a smile.

‘Do that.’ Richard headed for the cell block and she’d no doubt everyone would be released immediately. No one would dare to stand in his way when he was in this formidable mood.

The Somiton coachman soon had everything ready and as soon as she and her brothers were settled inside the vehicle moved off.

‘Thank God Richard turned up so promptly, Demelza,’ Johnny said.

‘How did you know it was he?’

‘From the way he looked at you and you at him. Nobody else would be aware that he wasn’t who he said he was. How did he get us free so soon?’

When she explained that she’d revealed the reason for their arrest they looked shocked.

‘I’m surprised he didn’t dispatch that toad. Preston will be a ruined man by the time Richard and Adam have done with him and it serves him right. I’m quite certain you weren’t the first lady he attempted to blackmail in that despicable way. Johnny and I think he’s corrupt and so are his constables.’

‘I wish I knew why our uncle was so desperate to have us live with him. Do you think that he’s always been deranged or that this has happened recently?’

‘Hopefully your husband will find the answers. With hindsight it would have been better to have involved him in this venture.’

‘Richard was asleep when we left, Johnny. Sir Hugo’s our family and therefore not any immediate concern of Adam’s. I don’t think they’ll be any serious repercussions for any of us despite what might have happened if he hadn’t turned up when he did.’

The carriage lapsed into silence, the boys apparently dozing, and this gave her ample time to mull over how her marriage might change now that she was hopelessly in love with Richard. She was roused from her reverie when the carriage rocked to a sudden halt.

The carriage door was opened and Richard stood there. ‘Johnny, you ride my horse and Silas you must travel on the box with the



coachman. I wish to speak in private to my wife.'

They didn't argue and tumbled from the carriage in seconds. He gave her brother his whip, gloves and hat; fortunately they were both wearing their greatcoats.

The vehicle rocked again as Richard joined her on the squabs. Without a by your leave, he picked her up and settled her firmly on his lap, inside the warmth of his riding coat, and then enveloped her in its folds just allowing her head to remain free and rest on his shoulder.

'Richard, tell me at once what happened to Sir Hugo and the others with him?'

'They would have none of us and retreated to the nearest inn. I'm still none the wiser as to why he behaved as he did but he'll not attempt to abduct you a second time.'

A strange heat was settling in a most unexpected place. She could feel his heart beating where she was pressed against his chest.

'I must tell you something. I am in love with you. I don't know when my feelings changed, I just know that they have.'

His roar of triumph was so loud that the horses spooked and for a few exciting moments, until the coachman had them back under control, they were travelling at breakneck speed.

'I love you too, my darling, and have been praying that you would come to feel the same but had no expectation of it happening so soon. I was prepared to give you the most frightful bear-garden jaw for your foolishness today but now I'm quite unmanned.'

'Then I'm going to tell you something else whilst you are in such a lenient mood. I hate Somiton Hall. Even though our wing is smaller than the main part of the house it's still far too big for comfort. Do we have to live there?'

He swung his feet up so that his back was pressed against one side of the carriage and his toes were on the other. This made them both more comfortable and certainly more stable if the carriage hit a pothole or two.

'Adam and I have an estate in Hertfordshire, half a day's travel to Town. It would actually be more convenient for our business for me to

be located there and for Adam to be at Somiton. It's a vast estate and requires his full attention. Edward and I now take care of our businesses.'

'That sounds perfect. When can we move there?'

'The family will be transferring to the house in Grosvenor Square at the end of March and remain for the Season; that is, until the middle of June. As none of us can attend public functions so soon after your mother's death, that would be the perfect time.'

'I've no wish to interfere in the budding romance between Johnny and Frances but separating them for a few months will be good for both of them. I have to travel frequently, therefore I want Manson to come with us. There's a decent cottage on the estate that he can inhabit.'

'A perfect solution to another dilemma, as I doubt that Jenny would have wished to accompany me if he'd remained at Somiton.'

His arms tightened slightly. His voice was gruff, almost unrecognisable. 'There's been more than enough conversation, my darling, as I have something much more interesting in mind.'

She threw herself backwards and was ejected from the cocoon of material with such force that she landed in an undignified heap in the well of the carriage.

He peered over the edge of the seat a look of bemusement on his face. She stared up at him. 'If you think for one minute, Mr Somiton, that I intend to become your true wife in the back of a carriage then you're sadly mistaken.'

His cheeks coloured and his expression was sheepish. 'I seem to spend a goodly portion of my time when we're together apologising for my behaviour. I give you my word that I'll not do anything reprehensible in here.'

'In which case, you can help me back to the seat. I shall sit on the far side, not next to you or in your lap as that seems to give you these unfortunate ideas.' She pursed her lips and attempted to look fierce.

'A wise decision, my darling, as when you're close to me I lose all sense of decorum.'

Her brothers must be imagining the worst. She leaned over and

unhooked the leather strap that held the window up. A blast of icy air came in – that should cool his passion a little. She poked her head out in the hope that she would see her brother and thus dispel any nonsense he might have thought about why he'd been expelled from the carriage so summarily.

He was nowhere in sight but she recognised the landscape and sat back with a smile. 'We're already on Somiton land, Richard, so it's fortunate, is it not, that I stopped you?'

He stretched out a long arm and closed the window. 'I stand corrected – or I could more accurately say that I sit corrected.'

She giggled and his smile made her pulse race. He had a wicked glint in his eye and she dreaded to think what he was planning next to embarrass her.

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The carriage rocked to a halt in the turning circle and Richard threw the door back, picked Demelza up from her seat, and jumped to the ground. He put her down immediately but kept his arm firmly around her waist.

The front door opened as if by magic and he whisked her through. He could hear the boys talking to Adam in the drawing room but he'd no intention of joining them.

Before she could protest she was halfway up the stairs. 'Richard, what are you doing? I have no wish to retire and if you think I'm going to tumble into bed with you in the middle of the afternoon you may forget about it right now. You gave me your word – are you breaking it so soon?'

'I said I wouldn't misbehave in the carriage. I gave no promise about anywhere else. I've wanted to make love to you for months. I love you to distraction and wish to show you just how much.'

He slackened his hold a little and he was bitterly disappointed when she slipped away from him. 'I am as eager as you to experience these things but at the appropriate time. I'm returning to my apartment to attend to my appearance. I suggest that you join your brother as you've much to talk about.'

This was the second time she'd rejected him and this time he

wasn't going to let the matter lie. He followed her into her sitting room determined to get his answer.

‘Demelza, before you go into your bedchamber, I wish to speak to you.’

She instantly detected that he was displeased and her eyes widened. He was a brute to snap at her but this was something they needed to settle if their marriage was to be a success. She had to understand that, as a husband, he was the one who issued orders and she was the one who followed them.

‘Well, what have I done now to anger you?’

‘This morning you sent me away, dismissed me as if I was a servant and then you did it again a moment ago.’

‘Is that all? I was feeling very unwell this morning and had just cast up my accounts and thought I might do so again. I hardly wished my new husband to be present when that happened.’

‘And just now?’ His voice was soft but he was finding it difficult to hide his annoyance.

‘I didn't want you to come in here as I knew I wouldn't have the will to say no.’ She wrung her hands and a tear trickled down her cheek. He went to comfort her but she held up her hand. ‘I want this thing between us to be perfect, not hurried, not a cause for gossip and sniggers from your family and the staff. I love you and you say that you love me, but I'm beginning to think that it's lust not love that motivates you.’

Before he could answer, deny this accusation, reassure her that his love was genuine, she was gone and he heard the key turn in the lock.

## Chapter Seventeen

Richard slumped into the nearest armchair knowing that he'd mishandled the situation. He might be a man of experience, had had an amenable mistress for several years in London, but he now understood that he knew very little about the workings of the female mind.

For the first time in his life he was going to ask Edward's advice and not Adam's – he was a married man and might well be able to give him the necessary advice to rectify this matter and not make it worse. He cut through several unused rooms and approached the study from a direction that didn't involve going past the drawing room where he knew his brother to be.

Edward looked up from his paperwork on his entrance. The three secretaries worked in a separate office so he was alone. He took one look at Richard's face and was on his feet and moving towards him. 'How can I help? I heard that your rescue was accomplished successfully but something is obviously seriously amiss.'

After some hesitation he eventually managed to explain the problem to his friend.

'Let me get this straight. You and Demelza are in love – something that wasn't the case when you married. You've yet to consummate the union and your eagerness to do so has given her the impression that you're putting physical intimacy ahead of her sensibilities.'

'Exactly that. How can I make things right?'

'Stay away from her, my friend, and let her come to you.'

'Have you bats in your attic? She's a girl scarcely out of the

schoolroom...'

'It's you who's lost his wits, Richard. Demelza was looking after her brothers and her mother, running the household, long before you went to Cornwall last year. She might be unversed in the ways of society but she's a woman grown and you should treat her as such.'

'You're right to remind me. I have been doing exactly that. Expecting her to obey without question as if she was a child and yet welcome my advances like a woman.' He ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head in disgust with himself.

'Then you will see the reasoning behind my suggestion. It's unfortunate that you're sleeping at opposite ends of the corridor but I'm sure if she wishes to be with you then that will be no obstacle to her.'

'And if she doesn't come to me tonight? How long must I wait before I go to her?'

'She will come when she's ready.'

'And if she mistakes my lack of attention for lack of interest, lack of love, what then?'

Edward patted him on the shoulder. 'Don't worry so much, my friend. Join Adam and the boys in the drawing room. I'll be along in a moment; I just have to finish this letter.'

'She hates it here, as do I, so we're moving to Hertfordshire when the others go to London. I'll speak to you about this in a day or two. I actually think it will work better having you here and me closer to our head office.'

'Adam will be sorry to see you go and so will I. It's fortunate indeed that there are so many of your cousins here to keep him company.'

This conversation had made things clearer. Edward was a close friend; he'd been as good as another brother for years. Since he'd married Eleanor, another Somiton cousin, he was literally a member of the family.

Richard was greeted by the boys and his brother as if he'd been missing for days.

'There you are at last, Richard. Is Demelza not with you?' Johnny

asked and looked anxiously over his shoulder.

‘I expect she’ll be down for dinner. She wished to change her raiment and remove the taint of that man from her person.’

Adam was at his side and gripped his hand so hard he winced. ‘That bastard will pay for what he tried to do. I’ve been talking to the boys about how best to achieve this and they’ve come up with some fiendish suggestions.’

An hour later he returned to his own apartment to change and it took all his resolve not to go to Demelza first. When he was ready, he strolled along and knocked loudly on her sitting room before entering.

She flew into his arms. ‘I’ve been waiting this age for you to collect me. I’m starving as I was too nervous to eat breakfast.’

He kissed her lightly and held her close for a moment. ‘You goose, you should have sent for something. I love that ensemble. Blue suits you to perfection.’

She slipped her hand through the crook of his arm and together they dashed through their freezing side of the house and into the marginally warmer main part of Somiton Hall.

‘Did you tell Adam of our plan to move?’

‘He fully supports your suggestion. You’ll love the house as it’s of modern construction, a fraction of the size of this one, but has every amenity. If there’s anything you wish to change once we’ve moved in you can do so.’ He grinned down at her. ‘I beg you, my darling, don’t ask my opinion as I’ve no taste at all when it comes to such things.’

She giggled and despite the fact that they were being observed by two footmen she stretched onto tiptoes and kissed him. ‘I think it more the case that you’ve no interest rather than no taste. It will serve you right, sir, if you returned from one of your trips abroad to find the entire place decked out in the Egyptian style.’

They walked into the drawing room where the others were gathered still laughing. By the time they’d been embraced, congratulated and commiserated with, by all present the butler arrived and announced that dinner was served.

Johnny and Silas gravitated to the young ladies but Demelza remained at his side. The four girls and two young men made every

evening a celebration. She was scarcely older than them and yet was no longer part of that group.

The evening was interminable, in his opinion, but pleasant enough. When she stood up with a smile his pulse skittered.

‘I’ll bid you all good evening, it’s been a long day and I’m still not quite as robust as I used to be.’ All the gentlemen were standing as was expected of them. He wanted to follow her out but somehow remained where he was. He wasn’t sure if she looked disappointed or relieved.

Estelle, the mother of Frances and Leo, retired next taking her daughter and the other three girls with her. He’d no wish to remain a moment longer than he had to.

‘Johnny, Silas, did your sister tell you of our plans?’

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Demelza dismissed Jenny with no instructions about not returning until called for in the morning. Her maid had been delighted to hear they were moving somewhere more comfortable than Somiton and had insisted she would have come even if Albert hadn’t.

‘I don’t like this huge old place, ma’am, I keep getting lost. It’ll be ever so nice being somewhere smaller and warmer and with only one servants’ hall.’

‘As you and Albert are walking out, have you discussed your nuptials?’

The girl blushed. ‘Good heavens, no, it’s far too soon for that. We’re not much more than good friends really.’

‘Would you accept his offer if he made one?’

‘I’m only eighteen years of age. I’m not sure I’m ready to become a wife and mother just yet.’

‘I’m delighted to hear you say so. I don’t want to lose you.’

She wasn’t sure if she should wait for Richard in the armchair in front of the fire or actually retire to bed. Why was he taking so long to come to her? Hadn’t she made it clear enough that she wanted him to share her bed?

The clock struck midnight and now instead of feeling excited and



loving towards her missing husband, she was angry. She scrambled out of bed and went to the door intending to lock it and make sure he couldn't come in if he did eventually come to her.

She leaned her face against the door frame and a wave of longing, of love, almost made her knees buckle. If he wouldn't come to her then she would go to him as she couldn't bear to spend another night apart.

Ignoring the fact that she was in just her cotton nightgown, her feet bare, her hair unbound she opened the door and ran down the freezing passage to his room. She burst in, her teeth chattering, and no explanation for her sudden appearance was necessary.

'My darling, you've come. If you hadn't, I don't know what I would have done.' She was snatched up and kissed so thoroughly she forgot everything but the pleasure of his lips on hers.

A considerable time later they were lying naked, limbs entwined and he was running his fingers through her somewhat tangled hair.

'If I'd known what I was missing, my darling Richard, I'd have dragged you into my bedchamber this afternoon and not been so silly about it.'

'If I die tonight then I die a happy man,' he said with a sigh of satisfaction.

She rolled over into his waiting arms. 'If you die tonight then I'll never forgive you. I intend to grow old and grey at your side.'

'I love you, my darling, and would have waited to make you mine if that's what you wanted. It was never lust that drove me, but love.'

'Whatever it is, beloved, I wish to experience it again.'

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The next morning it was not Demelza's maid who walked in on them but Richard's new valet. The resulting chaos caused by him dropping the jug of hot water was ignored by the two in bed as they had better things to do than worry about the feelings of the horrified young man.

The End